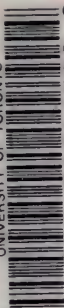


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BUT NOTHING SHALL STAND BETWEEN US ANY MORE.

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CARITÀ

Margaret Oliphant
BY MRS. OLIPHANT
AUTHOR OF "WITHIN THE PRECINCTS," ETC.

CHEAP EDITION



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LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1885

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CARITÀ.

CHAPTER I.

THE BERESFORDS.

JAMES BERESFORD and Annie his wife had been married for more than a dozen years—their only child, indeed, had nearly attained the age of twelve at the time when this history begins. They had both got footing on that plateau of middle age which, if it comes to something like level ground at thirty, need not think of a descending step for twenty years—the time of the greatest enjoyments and most solid progress of life. He was at one end and she at the other of the first decade; the one approaching the forties, the other scarcely well out of the twenties; both ready to laugh at the advance of years, which was as yet but a joke to them, and neither having thought of bidding any grave farewell to youth. She was impulsive, enthusiastic and nervous; he philosophical and speculative, a man ready to discuss any theory in earth or heaven, and without any prejudices such as might make one subject of discussion appear less legitimate than another. They were not very rich, but neither were they poor in any sense of the word. He had been called to the Bar, but had never gone any further in that career. They had enough between them to live on without show, but without pinching, as so many people of quietly social, semi-literary tastes do in London. They knew a number of people. They saw all the pictures, read all the books, and heard all the music that was going; not absorbed in any art, but with just enough devotion to all to make their life full and pleasant. And there could scarcely be a pleasanter life.

The fantasies of youth, but not the sentiment of youth, had ended for both. Mr. Beresford had some mildly scientific pursuits, was a member of some learned societies, and of one or two new and advanced clubs where clever men were supposed to abound. Occasionally in his comfortable library he wrote an article for a review or magazine, which was very much talked about by his friends, to the great edification and amusement of people who live by writing articles and say nothing about them. This gave him an agreeable sense of duty to add seriousness to his life; and he was never without occupation—meetings of committees, scraps of semi-public business, educational and other projects, which, for the moment at least, seemed full of interest to the world, made him feel himself a not unimportant, certainly not a useless, man. Mrs. Beresford, on her side, had the natural occupation of her housekeeping, and her child, whose education gave her much thought—so much thought that many people with full nurseries listened with a certain awe to her ideas of all that was necessary for her little girl, and sighed to think how much less was possible when there were six or seven little girls to think of.

The child, however, was not so over-educated and over-cared for as might have been fancied; for the parents were young, as has been said, very fond of each other, and fond of their own way; which likings did not consist with the burden of dragging a small child with them wherever they went. The Beresfords liked to go about 'honey-mooning,' as their friends called it, and as they themselves were not displeased to call it, by themselves, over the world. They would start sometimes quite suddenly, to the Riviera in the middle of winter, to escape London fogs and wintry chills; to Paris at Easter; to Scotland in the autumn; even to Norway sometimes, or such difficult places; and it stood to reason that they could not take the child with them when they started at a day's notice on these delightful journeys. For their journeys were delightful. They were well enough off not to require to count the cost; they went lightly, with little luggage and no servants, and they went everywhere together. But it would have been bad for the little girl; therefore she stayed at home, under the care of the best of nurses, who had been Mrs. Beresford's nurse before the child's; and the father and mother, like two lovers, roamed

lightly about the world. But when they were at home, Mrs. Beresford talked a great deal about education, and had plans enough to have educated six princesses, let alone one little girl of undistinguished lineage. It was a very lucky thing for all parties, their friends said, that they had but this one child. Had they been hampered by half-a-dozen, what could they have done? It would have changed their life completely. And one of their many felicities was, that whereas they were preserved from the old-maidishness of childless married persons by having a child, their freedom of action was preserved by the fact that they had but one.

And they were wonderfully free of other relations who might have hampered them. Mrs. Beresford had been an orphan from her childhood, brought up by her grandmother, who in the course of nature was dead too; and Mr. Beresford's only two relations were a wealthy aunt, Charity Beresford, who lived in a pretty house in the country, within driving distance of London, and with whom lived his elder sister, Cherry Beresford, named after her aunt, and living in considerable subjection to that energetic woman. Miss Beresford was the richest member of the family, and her nephew had expectations from her; and Charity was the favourite female name of this branch of the race. But the idea of calling her child Charity did not at all smile upon young Mrs. Beresford when her baby was born. She was beguiled, however, by the unusual look of it, which charmed her, into calling the little girl by the more melodious name of Carità, contracted prettily into Cara in the drawing-room, and Carry in the nursery. Aunt Charity growled when she heard of this, but did not otherwise complain, and gentle Aunt Cherry declared herself unfeignedly glad that her little niece had thus escaped the worse consequences of a symbolical name. When the young couple went away pleasuring, little Cara very often would be sent to Sunninghill, to pass the quiet days there under the charge of the aunts; and so all responsibility was removed from the minds of the parents. They had a letter sent to them every day to assure them of their welfare, however far off they might go—an extravagance which Aunt Charity condemned loudly, but which Aunt Cherry was proud of, as showing the devotion of the parents to little Cara. The child herself was very happy at Sunninghill, and was a much more prominent person there than at

home, where very often she was in the way, and interrupted conversation. For a father and mother who are very fond of each other, and have a great deal to talk of, often, it must be allowed, are hampered by the presence of one curious child, with quick ears and an inconveniently good memory. In this particular the half-dozen would have been more easily managed than the one.

Thus the Beresfords led a very pleasant life. They had the prettiest house; naturally, travelling so much as they did, they had been able to 'pick up' a great many charming things. You could scarcely see their walls for pictures; some very good, one or two wonderful windfalls, and the rest pretty enough; nothing strikingly bad, or next to nothing. Where other people had ordinary china, they had genuine old faience, and one or two plaques which Raphael himself might have seen perhaps—Urbino ware, with Messer Giorgio's name upon it. Not to speak of the Venice point which Mrs. Beresford wore, there were brackets in the drawing-room hung with scraps of old *point coupé* which many a lady would have been glad to trim her dress with; and, instead of common *portières*, they had two pieces of old tapestry from an Italian convent which devotees went down on their knees before. But I have not space to tell you how many pretty things they had. It was one of the pleasures of their life whenever they saw anything that pleased them to bring it home for the decoration of that pretty drawing-room, or the library, which Mr. Beresford had filled with old vellum-bound volumes of curious editions, and pretty books in Russian leather which kept the room always fragrant. What was wanting to this pleasant, warm, full, delightful living? Nothing but continuance; and it had not struck either of them that there was any doubt of this for long, long years at least. What a long way off threescore years and ten look when you are not yet forty! and death looked further off still. Neither of them thought of dying. Why should they? For, to be sure, though we know very well that must happen to us some time, in our hearts we are incredulous, and do not believe that *we* ever can die. The Beresfords never dreamt of anything so frightful. They were well, they were happy, they were young; and as it had been, so it would be; and a world so bright they felt must mean to go on for ever.

When Cara was about ten, however, the mother began to

feel less well than usual. There was nothing much the matter with her, it was thought: want of 'tone,'—a little irritability of disposition—a nervous temperament. What she wanted was change of air and scene. And she got that, and got better, as was thought; but then became ill again. No, not ill—unwell, indisposed, *mal à son aise*, nothing more. There was nothing the matter with her really, the doctors thought. Her lungs and her heart, and all vital organs, were perfectly sound; but there was a little local irritation which, acting upon a nervous temperament—— The nervous temperament was perpetually kept in the front, and all sorts of evils imputed to its agency. At Sunninghill, it must be confessed, they did not believe in the illness at all.

'Fudge,' said Aunt Charity, who had always been strong, and had no faith in nerves, 'don't talk to me of your nervous temperaments. I know what it means. It means that Annie has fallen sick of always having her own way. She has everything she can desire, and she is ill of having nothing more to wish for. A case of Alexander over again in a London drawing-room—that's what it is, and nothing else, my word upon it; and I know my niece.'

'Yes, Mr. Maxwell; perhaps there is some truth in what Aunt Charity says,' said Miss Cherry. 'I think you know I don't judge harshly——'

'That means that *I* judge harshly,' said Miss Charity, bursting in; 'thank you, my dear. Well, you may call me uncharitable if you please; but there's where it is; let James lose the half of his fortune, or all his china get broken, and she'd come round in no time—that's what ails Annie. But as she belongs to a very refined society, and has a silly husband, it's called nerves. Bless me, Cherry, I hope I knew what nerves were, and all about it, before you were born.'

'You could not know Annie before I was born,' said Miss Cherry, who was devoid of imagination. 'I hope you will give her your best attention, Mr. Maxwell. My brother James is a very fond husband, poor fellow! If anything happened to Annie, he would never get the better of it. As for marrying again, or anything of that sort——'

'Good heavens!' said the doctor; 'I hope there is no need to take such an idea into consideration. We must not go so fast.'

Miss Charity laughed. She was a great deal older than

her niece, but much more sensible. 'There's the seventh commandment to be thought of,' she said; for her remarks were sometimes more free than they ought to be, and put Miss Cherry to the blush: and this was all the worse because she immediately walked out into the garden through the open window and left the younger lady alone with the doctor, who was an old friend of the family, and contemporary of the second Charity Beresford. Very old friends they were; even it was supposed that in their youth there had been or might have been passages of sentiment between these two now sitting so calmly opposite each other. Mr. Maxwell, however, by this time was a widower, and not at all sentimental. He laughed, too, as Miss Beresford made her exit by the window. He was very well used to the family, and all its ways.

'*She wears very well,*' he said, reflectively. 'I don't think she has aged to speak of for these twenty years. When I used to be coming here in my early days, when I was beginning practice——'

'The rest of us have changed very much since then.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Maxwell, thinking most of himself; 'but she not at all. I could think when I look at her that I was still, as I say, a young fellow beginning practice——'

Miss Cherry sighed—very softly, but still she did sigh: over forty, but still in the position and with many of the sentiments of a girl. People laugh at the combination, but it is a touching one on the whole. What ages of lingering monotonous life had passed over her since her present companion began his practice, since her Aunt Charity had begun to be an old woman! Dr. Maxwell had married, had lost his wife, had gone through perhaps sharper troubles than Miss Cherry had known. He was now middle-aged and stoutish and weather-beaten—weather-beaten in aspect and in soul—while she was slim and soft and maidenly still. The sigh was half for those uneventful years, and half for the undevelopment which she was conscious of—the unchangedness of herself, underneath the outer guise, which was changed; but this was not safe ground, nor could it be talked of. So she brushed away the sigh with a little cough, and added quickly:

'I know perhaps what nerves are better than my aunt does, and I know Annie better. Tell me seriously, Mr. Maxwell, now we are alone. You don't apprehend anything serious? Should she go on travelling and running about as

they do if there is really anything the matter? No one can be so much interested as I am. You would be quite frank with me?’

‘It is the best thing for her,’ said the doctor. ‘You now—I should not say the same for you. You are a tranquil person and patient; but for her, the more she runs about the better. It distracts her and keeps her from thinking. If she worries, it’s all over with a woman like that.’

‘She has so little to worry about.’

‘Just so; and the less one has to bear the less one is fit for; that is to say,’ said the doctor, getting up and going to the window, ‘the less some people are fit for. There’s that old aunt of yours to prove me a fool. She has never had anything to bear, that I know of; and she is strong enough to bear anything. Sixty-eight, and just look at her. There’s a *physique* for you—that is the kind of woman,’ Mr. Maxwell said, with a little outburst of professional enthusiasm, ‘that I admire—as straight as a rod still, and every faculty in good order. That a woman like that should never have married is a loss to the world.’

Miss Cherry, who had gone to the window too, and stood by his side, looked out somewhat wistfully at her old aunt. Cherry was not like her, but took after the other side of the family, her own mother, who had died young, and had not possessed any *physique* to speak of. ‘It is very sweet to-day in the garden,’ she said, inconsequently, and stepped out into the world of flowers and sunshine. Sunninghill was an ideal house for two ladies, a place which people who were shut out from such delights considered quite enough for happiness. Indeed, Miss Cherry Beresford’s friends in general resented deeply the little plaintive air she sometimes took upon her. ‘What could she wish for more?’ they said, indignantly; ‘a place that was just too good to be wasted on two single women. There should be a family in it.’ This was especially the sentiment of the rector’s wife, who was a friend of Cherry’s, and who felt it a personal slight to herself, who had a large family and many cares, when Cherry Beresford, with not a thing in the world to trouble her, presumed to look as if she was not quite happy. The house stood upon a hill, fringed round with small but delightful woods. These woods were on a level with the highest turrets of the great beautiful royal Castle of St. George, which lay full within sight in the after-

noon sunshine. So you may imagine what a view it was that was visible from the old smooth velvet lawn round the house, which formed the apex to these woods. The quiet plain all around lay basking in the light underneath, and the Castle upon its hill dominated, with a broad and placid grandeur, that majestic sweep of country, with all its lights and shadows. The royal flag fluttered on the breeze, the great tower rose grey and solid against the sky. Green branches framed in this picture on every side; the cuttings in the trees made a picture-gallery indeed of different views for different hours, according to the lights. 'What a lovely place it is!' Mr. Maxwell said, with sudden enthusiasm; 'I always forget how lovely it is till I come back.'

'Yes, it is beautiful,' said Cherry, who was used to it. 'If you are going to send them away, I suppose Cara may come to us for the summer?—that makes such a difference.' Cherry was very well used to the different lights. She acknowledged the beauty of her home, and yet I can fancy circumstances under which she would have liked a little house in a street better. Man or woman either cannot live by beauty alone any more than by bread.

'Here's a pretty business,' said Miss Beresford, briskly; 'half of my roses, I believe, spoiled for this year; no second show this time. Jones is the greatest idiot; he pretends to know everything, and he knows nothing. Your *protégé*, Cherry, of course. All the incapables hang on by you.'

'I can't see any signs of deficiency,' said the doctor, looking round.

'Not at this moment; if there were, he should have his dismissal on the spot. If those two go off again, as you are always sending them off, tell James I insist on the child coming here. Ah! that's what your women of nervous temperament do—leave their children at home in a poky London square, while they go wandering over the world. Tell them I wish it,' said Miss Beresford, with a laugh; 'they never go against me.'

'They know how kind you always are.'

'They know I'm old and will have something to leave behind me, that's the plain English of it—as if I was going to accept poor Cherry's subjection, poor soul, without rewarding her for it! It is she who will have everything when I'm gone. I've told them that, but still they think there's a chance

that Cara might cut her old aunt out. I can see through them. I see through most people,' she added, with a laugh, looking at him full. How could she know the thought passing through his mind at the moment, which was the abrupt reflection, uncalled for perhaps, that for a professional man, who had made no extraordinary name in his profession, Cherry Beresford, though an old maiden, would make not such a bad wife? Could the old witch see through broadcloth, and the comfortable coating of middle-aged flesh and blood, straight into a man's heart? He grew red foolishly, as if that were possible, and stammered a little in his reply:

'I can believe everything that is clever of you as well as everything that is kind; though why you ladies should make such a point of having a little chit like that, who can only disturb your quiet in this paradise of a place——'

'Oh, how can you say so!' said Cherry. 'The child's voice and the child's face make all the difference—they are better than sunshine. They make the place beautiful. I would give it all, twenty times over, to have the child.'

'Whom her mother is very glad to leave behind her.'

'Hold your tongue, Cherry,' said the elder lady; 'you mild little old maids, you are always in a way about children. I never took up that line. A child in the abstract is a nuisance. Now, a man—there are advantages about a man. Sometimes he's a nuisance too, but sometimes he's a help. Believe them, and they'll tell you that marriage was always far from their thoughts, but that children are their delight. That's not my way of thinking. But I happen to like little Cara because she is Cara, not because she is a child. So she may come and take her chance with the rest.'

Cherry had turned away along the garden path, and was looking through one of the openings at one of the views. She knew it by heart—exactly how the light fell, and where were the shadows, and the name of every tower, and almost the shape of every cloud. Was it wonderful that this was not so delightful to her as to the strangers who could not see that view every day in their lives? To some people, indeed, the atmospheric changes, the effects of wind and colour, the waverings and dispersions of those clouds, would have made poetry enough to fill up all that was wanting; but poor Miss Cherry was not poetical in this big way, though she was very fond of pretty verses, and even wrote some occasionally; but how she

longed for the child's innocent looks—the child's ceaseless prattle! Her gentle delicacy was hurt at that unnecessary gibe about the old-maidishness, and her supposed sham rejection of the husband who had never come her way. 'Why should she talk of men—especially before *him*? What do I want with men?' said poor Miss Cherry to herself; 'but my own niece—my brother's child—surely I may wish for her.' And surely there could not have been a more innocent wish.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIGHT.

'WHICH you please; you are not gouty or rheumatical, or anything of that sort,' said Mr. Maxwell, almost gaily. 'Homburg, for instance—Homburg would do—or Baden, if you prefer that. I incline to the one you prefer; and enjoy yourself as much as you can—that is my prescription. Open air, novelty, change; and if you find you don't relish one place, go to another. The sea, if you take a fancy for the sea; and Sir William is of my opinion exactly. Choose the place which amuses you most.'

'It seems to me,' said Mr. Beresford, 'that these wise men are laughing at you, Annie. They know there's nothing the matter with you. If I were not much obliged to them for thinking so, I should say you had some reason to be offended. One knows what you doctors mean when you tell a patient to do whatever she likes best.'

'It means one of two things,' said Mrs. Beresford; 'either that it is nothing, or that it is hopeless——'

Her husband burst into a soft laugh. 'Well,' he said, 'it is very evident it cannot be the last—so it must be as I say. It is injurious to our pride, my darling; for I allow that it is pleasant to possess either in your own person or your wife's a delicate and mysterious malady, of which it can be said that it baffles the doctors, without very much hurting the patient; but never mind. If you can bear this disrespectful verdict that you have nothing the matter with you, I assure you it makes me quite happy.'

Mrs. Beresford looked at the doctor with very keen, eager

eyes—eyes which had grown bigger and keener of late, perhaps from the failing of the round, smooth outlines of the face. She noticed that, though Maxwell saw very well that she was looking at him, he did not reply to those looks, but rather turned to her husband and answered him, as if he had not observed her at all.

‘I don’t mean to be at all disrespectful,’ he said; ‘there is a little disturbance of the system, which might turn to something as serious as you could desire, and take away the comfort of life perhaps more completely than a regular disease; but I hope that is not likely to happen here.’

‘No; I don’t think it,’ said the easy man. ‘We shall try Baden, which is the prettiest—unless you prefer some other place; in short, we shall go off without guide or compass, and do exactly what pleases ourselves. We have done so, it must be allowed, pretty often before—but to do it with the sanction of the faculty——’

‘And the child—as usual—will go to Sunninghill?’

‘Why should you say as usual, Mr. Maxwell?’ said Mrs. Beresford, with a suspicion of offence. ‘Do you think I ought to take her with me? Do you suppose, perhaps, that I might not come back again—that I might never—see——’

‘This is so unnecessary,’ said the doctor, remonstrating. ‘What must I say? I wish I was as certain of a thousand a year. You will come back quite well, I hope.’

‘When people are very ill don’t you say much the same things to them? There was poor Susan Maitland, whom you banished to Italy to die. People talked of her coming back again. Oh, no! I am not thinking of myself, but of the subject in general. One needed only to look in her face to see that she would never come back.’

‘People have different ideas of their duty,’ said Maxwell. ‘Some think it best not to frighten a patient with thoughts of death. I don’t know that one can lay down any rule; one is guided by circumstances. To some nervous people it is best not to say anything. Some are more frightened than others—just as some people are more susceptible to pain than others.’

‘Now I am going to ask you another question,’ said Mrs. Beresford. ‘Suppose you had a patient very ill—I mean hopelessly ill, beyond all cure—do you think it is right to keep them alive as you do now, struggling to the last, staving

off every new attack that might carry them off in quiet, fighting on and on to the last moment, and even prolonging that, when it comes so far, with cordials and stimulants? Keeping their breath in their poor, suffering bodies till you get to the end of your resources—your dreadful, cruel resources, that is what I call them. Do you think this is right? I had an aunt who died dreadfully—of cancer——’

‘Ah! An aunt? You did not tell me this,’ said the doctor, off his guard; then, recovering himself, with something that looked like alarm, he said, hurriedly: ‘What would you have us do—kill the poor creatures? neglect them? refuse what aid, what alleviations we can——’

‘I’ll tell you what I should like you to do if it were me,’ she said, eagerly. ‘When it was all over, when you were sure I could not get better, when there was nothing more in life but to suffer—suffer: then I should like you to make a strong, sweet dose for me to put me out of my trouble. I should like James to give it me. Do you remember what was said that time in India, in the mutiny? I don’t know if it was true, but people said it. That the husbands of some of the poor ladies kissed them and shot them, to save them; don’t you remember? That is what I should like you to do—a sweet, strong dose; and James would bring it to me and kiss me, and put it to my lips. That would be true love!’ she said, growing excited, the pale roses in her cheeks becoming hectic red; ‘that would be true friendship, Mr. Maxwell! Then I should not feel afraid. I should feel that you two stood between me and anguish, between me and agony——’

Both the men rose to their feet as if to restrain her vehemence, with one impulse. ‘My darling, my darling!’ said James Beresford, in dismay, ‘what are you thinking of?’ As for Mr. Maxwell, he walked to the window and looked out, his features working painfully. There was a moment in which the husband and wife clung together, he consoling her with every reassuring word that he could think of, she clinging to him with long, hysterical sobs. ‘My love, what has put this into your head?’ he said, half sobbing too, yet pretending to laugh. ‘My Annie, what fancy is this? Have you lost your wits, my darling? Why, this is all folly; it is a dream; it is a craze you have taken into your head. Here is Maxwell will tell you——’

But Maxwell made him a sign over his wife’s head so im-

passioned and imperative that the man was struck dumb for the moment. He gazed blankly at the doctor, then stooped down to murmur fond words less distinct and articulate in her ear. Fortunately, she was too much excited, too much disturbed, to notice this sudden pause, or that the doctor said nothing in response to her husband's appeal. She held fast by his arm and sobbed, but gradually grew calmer, soothed by his tenderness, and after a while made a half-smiling, tearful apology for her weakness. It was after dinner on a lovely summer evening, not more than twilight, though it was late. The two gentlemen had been lingering over their claret, while she lay on the sofa waiting for them, for she did not choose to be shut up upstairs all by herself, she said. After she had recovered they went to the drawing-room, where the windows were all open, and a couple of softly-burning lamps lit up the twilight with two half-veiled moons of light. There was not a lovely prospect as at Sunninghill; nothing, indeed, but the London square, where a few trees vegetated, just room enough for the dewdrops to fall, and for 'the little span of sky and little lot of stars' to unfold themselves. But even London air grows soft with that musical effect of summer, and the sounds of passing voices and footsteps broke in with a faint, far-off sound as in dreams: the country itself could not have been more peaceful. Mrs. Beresford, half-ashamed of herself, sat down at the little, bright tea-table, just within the circle of one of the lamps, and made tea, talking with a little attempt at gaiety, in which, indeed, the natural revulsion of relief after that outbreak of alarm and melancholy was evident. It was she now who was the soul of the little party; for the doctor was moody and preoccupied, and her husband watched her with an anxiety almost too great to be kept within the bounds of ordinary calm. She rose, however, to the occasion. She began to talk of their probable travels, of Baden and Homburg, and all the other places which had been suggested to her. 'We shall be as well known about the world as the Wandering Jew,' she said; 'better, for he had not a wife; and now that we have nearly exhausted Europe, there will be nothing for us but the East or Egypt—suppose we go to Egypt; that would be original?'

'Not at all original,' said Mr. Maxwell, who seemed half to resent her new-born gaiety. 'All the cockneys in the world go to Egypt. Mr. Cook does the Pyramids regularly;

and as for Jerusalem, it is common, common as Margate, and the society not much unlike.'

'Margate is very bracing, I have always heard,' said Mrs. Beresford, 'and much cheaper than a German bath. What do you say to saving money, James, and eating shrimps and riding donkeys? I remember being at Margate when I was a child. They say there is no such air anywhere; and Mr. Maxwell says that the sea, if I like the sea——'

'As for bracing air, my love, I think there is nothing like St. Moritz. Do you remember how it set me up after that—that——'

'Give him a big, well-sounding name, doctor,' said Mrs. Beresford, laughing; 'it was only a bilious attack. But talking of the sea, there is Biarritz—that would do, don't you think? It is warm, and it *was* gay. After all, however, I don't think I care for the sea. The Italian lakes are fine in the autumn, and as it gets cooler we might get on perhaps to Florence, or even Rome—or Kamtschatka, or Timbuctoo, or the Great Sahara,' she said, with a burst of laughter. 'You are complaisance itself, you gentlemen. Now I'll go and sing you something to reward you for humouring me to the top of my bent, and licensing me to go where I please.'

She had a pretty voice and sang well. The piano was at the other end of the room, the 'back drawing-room' of the commonplace London house. The two men kept their places while she went away into the dim evening, and sat down there scarcely visible, and sang. The soft, sweet voice, not powerful, but penetrating, rose like a bird in the soft gloom. James Beresford looked at the doctor with an entreating look of secret anguish as the first notes rose into the air, so liquid, so tender, so sweet.

'Are you afraid? tell me!' he said, with pathetic brevity.

Maxwell could not bear this questioning. He started up, and went to look this time at a picture on the wall. 'I don't know that I have any occasion to be afraid,' he said, standing with his back turned to his questioner, and quite invisible from the piano. 'I'm—a nervous man for a doctor when I'm interested in a case——'

Here there was a pause, for she had ended the first verse of the song, and the low warble of the symphony was not enough to cover their voices.

'Don't speak of her as a case,' said Beresford, low but

eager, as the singing recommenced: 'you chill my very blood.'

'I didn't mean to,' said the doctor, with colloquial homeliness; and he went away into the back drawing-room and sat down near the piano, to escape being questioned, poor Beresford thought, who sat still mournfully in the narrow circle of the lamplight, asking himself whether there was really anything to fear. The soft security of the house with all its open windows, the friendly voices heard outside, the subdued pleasant light, the sweet voice singing in the dimness, what a picture of safety and tranquillity it made! What should happen to disturb it? Why should it not go on for ever? James Beresford's sober head grew giddy as he asked himself this question, a sudden new ache undreamed of before leaping up, in spite of him, into his heart. The doctor pretended to be absorbed in the song; he beat time with his fingers as the measure went on. Never in the memory of man had he shown so much interest in singing before. Was it to conceal something else, something which could not be put into words, against the peace of this happy house, which had come into his heart?

Fortunately, however, Beresford thought, his wife forgot all about that agitating scene for some days. She did not speak of it again; and for about a week after was unusually lively and gay, stronger and better than she had been for some time, and more light in heart, talking of their journey, and making preparations for it with all the pleasant little sentiment which their 'honeymooning' expeditions had always roused in her. When everything was ready, however, the evening before they left home a change again came over her. Cara had been sent to Sunninghill with her nurse that day, and the child had been unwilling to go, and had clung to her mother with unusual pertinacity. Even when this is inconvenient it is always flattering: and perhaps Mrs. Beresford was pleased with the slight annoyance and embarrassment which it caused.

'Remember, James,' she said, with some vivacity, as they sat together that evening, 'this is to be the last time we go honeymooning. Next time we are to be respectable old married people (as we are, with our almost grown-up daughter). She is nearly as tall as I am, the child! nearly eleven—and so very tall for her age.'

'I think we might take her,' said Beresford, who indeed had often wished for her before. 'She is old enough to bear the travelling, and otherwise it would do her good.'

'Yes; this must be the last time,' she said, her voice suddenly dropping into a sigh, and her mood changing as rapidly. A house is dreary on the eve of departure. Boxes in the hall, pinafors on the furniture, the pretty china, the most valuable nicknacks all carried away and locked up—even the habitual books disturbed from their places, the last *Pall Mall* on the table. The cloud came over her face as shadows slit over the hills, coming down even while she was speaking. 'The last time!' she said. 'I can't help shivering. Has it grown cold? or is it that someone is walking over my grave, as people say?'

'Why, Annie, I never knew you were superstitious.'

'No. It is a new thing for me; but that is scarcely superstition. And why should I care who walked over my grave? I must die some time or other and be buried, unless they have taken to burning before then. But there is one thing I feel a great deal about,' she added, suddenly. 'I said it once before, and you were frightened, James. If you knew that I was going to die of a painful disease—*must* die—that nothing could happen to save me, that there was nothing before me but hopeless pain—James, dear, listen to me!—don't you think you would have the courage for my sake to make an end of me, to put me out of my trouble?'

'Annie, for Heaven's sake don't talk so. It is nonsense, but it makes me unhappy.'

'As a matter of speculation,' she said, with a knowledge of his weakness, 'you can't think it would be wrong to do it—do you, James?'

'As a matter of speculation,' he said; and the natural man awoke in him. He forgot the pain the idea had caused him, and thought of it only as an idea; to put it in other words, the woman beguiled him, and he got upon one of his hobbies. 'There are many things one allows as speculation which one is not fond of in fact. People must have a certain power over their own lives, and I think with you, my love, that it is no charity to keep infirm and suffering people just alive, and compel them to drag their existence on from day to day. Notwithstanding Heaven's canon 'gainst self-slaughter, I think people should be allowed a certain choice. I am not

altogether against euthanasia; and if indeed recovery is hopeless and life only pain——'

'Yes, James,' she said, eagerly, her eyes lighting up, her cheeks flaming with the red of excitement; 'I am glad you see it like that; one might go further perhaps—when from any reason life was a burden; when one was useless, hopeless, unhappy——'

'Stop a little; we are going too fast,' he said, with a smile, so entirely did the argument beguile him. 'No one is justified in treating unhappiness like a mortal disease; unhappiness may pass away—does pass away, we all know, even when it seems worst. I cannot allow that; neither would I let people judge which lives were useless, their own or other people's; but illness which was beyond the possibility of cure might be different; therefore, if the patient wished it, his wish, I think, should be law——Annie, my darling! what is this? what do you mean?'

She had suddenly risen from where she was sitting near him, and thrown herself half at his feet, half into his arms.

'Only this,' she said; 'promise me—promise me, James! if this should ever happen to me—if you had the assurance, not only from me, but from—the people who know—that I had a terrible complaint, that I could never get better; promise that you would put me out of my pain, James. Promise that you would give me something to deliver me. You would not stand by and see me going down, down into the valley of death, into misery and weariness and constant pain, and, O God! loathsomeness, James!'

She buried her head in his breast, clinging to him with a grasp which was almost fierce; her very fingers which held him, appealing strenuously, forcing a consent from him. What could he say? He was too much distressed and horrified to know how to shape his answer. Fond words, caresses, soothing of every kind were all in vain for use at such a moment. 'Far be it from you, my darling; far be it from you,' he cried. 'You! oh, how can you let your imagination cheat you so, my love! Nothing like this is going to happen, my Annie, my best, my dearest——'

'Ah!' she cried; 'but if it were not imagination!—promise me, James.'

Whether she did eventually wring this wild promise from him he never knew. He would have said anything to calm

her, and finally he succeeded; and having once more cleared her bosom of this perilous stuff, she regained her gaiety, her courage and spirits, and they set off as cheerful as any pair of honeymoon travellers need wish to be. But after she had left him and gone to her room pacified and comforted that night, you may fancy what sort of a half hour that poor man had as he closed the windows, which had still been left open, and put out the lamps, as was his practice, for they were considerate people and did not keep their servants out of bed. He stepped out on the balcony and looked up at the moon, which was shedding her stream of silver light as impartially upon the London housetops as if those white roofs had been forest trees. How still it seemed, every one asleep or going to rest, for it was late—a few lights glimmering in high windows, a sensation of soft repose in the very air! God help this silent, sleeping earth, upon which, even in her sleep, dark evils were creeping! Was someone perhaps dying somewhere even at that serene moment, in the sweet and tranquil stillness? His heart contracted with a great pang. In the midst of life we are in death. Why had those haunting, terrible words come into his ears?

CHAPTER III.

HONEYMOONING.

THE real honeymoon is not always a delightful moment. This, which sounds like heresy to the romantic, and blasphemy to the young, is a fact which a great many people acknowledge readily enough when they have got beyond the stage at which it sounds like an offence to the wife or to the husband who is supposed to have made that period rapturous. The new pair have not the easy acquaintance with each other which makes the happiness of close companionship; perhaps they have not that sympathy with each other's tastes which is almost a better practical tie than simple love. They are half afraid of each other; they are making discoveries every day of new points in each other's characters, delightful or undelightful as may be, which bewilder their first confidence of union; and the more mind and feeling there is between them, the more likely is this to be the case. The shallow and superficial 'get on'

better than those who have a great deal of excellence or tender depth of sentiment to be found out. But after the pair have come to full acquaintance, after they have learned each other from A B C up to the most difficult chapter; after the intercourse of ordinary life has borne its fruit; there is nothing in the world so delightful as the honeymooning which has passed by many years the legitimate period of the honeymoon. Sometimes one sees respectable fathers and mothers enjoying it, who have sent off their children to the orthodox honeymoon, and only then feel with a surprised pleasure how sweet it is to have their own solitude *à deux*; to be left to themselves for a serene and happy moment; to feel themselves dearer and nearer than they ever were before. There is something infinitely touching and tender in this honeymooning of the old. James Beresford and his wife, however, were not of these. They were still young, and of all the pleasures they had there was none equal to this close and unbroken companionship. They knew each other so well, and all their mutual tastes, that they scarcely required to put their intercourse into words; and yet how they would talk—about everything, about nothing, as if they had just met after a long absence, and had thoughts to exchange on every subject. This is a paradox; but we are not bound to explain paradoxes which are of the very essence of life, and the most attractive things in it. It had been the habit of these two to go everywhere together. Mrs. Beresford had not the prejudices of an English female Philistine. She went where her husband wanted to go, fearing nothing, and trotted about with him high and low, through picture galleries and old churches, to studios, even behind the scenes of the operas, and through the smoke clouds of big ateliers. Nothing came amiss to her with him by her side. It is almost the only way in which a woman can enjoy the freedom of movement, the easy locomotion of a man. Mrs. Beresford went away quite cheerfully, as we have said. She forgot or put away her mysterious terrors. She addressed herself to all the ordinary enjoyments which she knew so well. ‘We shall never be so free again,’ she said, half laughing, half with a remote infinitesimal pang. ‘We shall have to go to the correct places and do the right things when Cara is with us.’ ‘We must give up bric-a-brac,’ she said afterwards. ‘Cara must not grow up acquainted with all those dusty back premises; her pretty frocks would be spoiled and her infantino

sincerity. If she had heard you bargaining, James, for that Buen Retiro cup! Saying it is naught, it is naught, and then bragging of the treasure you had found as soon as it was out of the dealer's hands.'

'Well,' he said, with a shrug of his shoulders; 'I only do as other people do. Principles of honour don't consist with collecting. I am no worse than my neighbours.'

'But that will never do for Cara,' said the mother; 'if you and I are not all her fancy painted us, we will not do for Cara. No; I thought you had never remarked her really. She is the most uncompromising little idealist! and if we disappoint her, James, I don't know what the child will do.'

'It appears to me that you are making a bugbear of Cara.'

'No; but I know her. We must give up the bric-a-brac; for if you continue with it under her blue eyes you will be ruined. If she was here she would make you go back and tell the man he has sold you that cup too cheap.'

'That would be nonsense,' said Mr. Beresford, involuntarily putting his hand into the pocket where he kept his money. 'Folly! You don't suppose he gave half as much for it as he sold it to us for. The very mention of that sort of sickening conscientiousness puts one out. We are to sell in the dearest and buy in the cheapest market, eh? That's the true principle of trade.'

'It is not in the Bible, though,' said Mrs. Beresford, with a smile. 'Cara would open her eyes and wonder; and you, who are the weakest of men, could never stand against her if Cara made big eyes.'

'The weakest of men! You flatter me, it must be allowed——'

'Yes; so you are, James. You could not endure to be disapproved of. What would have become of you if I, instead of giving in to all your ways, had been a more correct and proper person? If I had made you visit just the right things—go to English parties, and keep to the proper sort of tourist society? If you had been obliged to sit indoors in the evenings and read a *Galignani* or a Tauchnitz novel while I worked, what would have become of you? I know well enough, for my part.'

'I should have done it, I suppose,' he said, half laughing; 'and will Cara—little Cara—be like that? You frighten me, Annie; we had better make away with her somehow; marry her, or hand her over to the aunts, before it comes to this.'

Then a sudden change came over the smiling face. 'Cara—or someone else—will most likely be like that. Poor James! I foresee trouble for you. How you will think of me when you are in bonds! when you want to go out and roam about on the Boulevards, and have to sit still instead and read aloud to somebody! Ah, how you will think of me! You will say, Poor Annie! if Annie had but lived——'

'What is this? what is this?' he said. 'Again, Annie! I think you want to make me miserable; to take all the comfort out of my life.'

'Oh, no, no; not that,' she said. 'I am only going to get my bonnet, and then we shall go out. Cara is not here yet to keep us in order. We can honeymoon yet for one more year.'

Was this only the caprice of her nature (she had always been capricious) going a little further than usual? Her husband liked her all the better for her quick changes of sentiment; the laughing and crying that were like an April sky. He said to himself that she had always been like that; always changing in a moment, quarrelling sometimes even, making him uncomfortable for mere variety. Monotony was the thing she hated; and now she had taken this fad, this fancy, and thought herself ill. How could she be ill when she still could run about with him and enjoy herself as much as ever? How keen she had been in the bric-a-brac shop of which she had chosen to talk! He never should have found out that Buen Retiro cup but for her. It was her sharp eyes that saw it. It was she who had rummaged through the dust and all the commonplace gatherings to those things which had really interest. Ill! though all the College of Physicians swore it, and she to boot, he would not believe that she was ill. Disturbance of the system—that was all the worst of them ever said; but how little meaning there was in that! Out of sorts! reduced to plain English, that was what disturbance of the system meant; and everybody was subject to as much. She came in, while he was in the full course of these thoughts, with a brilliant little flush on her cheeks, her eyes shining, her whole aspect full of animation. 'I am ready, Sir,' she said, making him a mocking curtsy. Yes; capricious, that was what she had always been; and he loved her for it. It explained her changes, her fancies, her strange notions better than anything else could do.

That was the first day, however, on which her strength

really showed symptoms of breaking down. She got tired, which was a thing she never owned to; lost the pretty flush on her cheek, became pale, and worn out. 'I don't know what is the matter with me,' she said; 'all at once I feel so tired.'

'And with very good reason,' said he. 'Think how rapidly we have been travelling; think what we have been doing since. Why, you were on foot the whole morning. You are tired; so am I, for that matter. I was thinking of saying so, but you are always so hard upon my little fatigues. What a comfort for me to find that you, too, for once in a way, can give in!' Thus he tried to take her favourite part and laugh her out of her terrors. She consented with a smile more serious than her gravity had been of old, and they went back to their room and dined 'quietly;' and he sat and read to her, according to the picture of English domesticity which she had drawn out with smiles a few hours before. It was so soon after that tirade of hers that they could not but remember it, both of them. As it happened, there was nothing but a Tauchnitz novel to read (and who that has been ill or sad, or who has had illness or sadness to solace in a foreign place, but has blessed the novels of Tauchnitz?) and he read it, scarcely knowing what the words were which fluttered before his eyes. And as for her, she did not take much notice of the story either, but lay on the sofa, and listened, partly to his voice, partly to the distant sound of the band playing, with strange heaviness and aching in her heart. It was not that she wished to be out listening to the band, moving about in the warm air, hearing the babble of society—that was not what she cared for; but to be lying there out of the current; to have dropped aside out of the stream; to be unable for the common strain of life! So he read, sadly thinking, not knowing what he read; and she half listened, not knowing what she was listening to. It was the first time, and the first time is the worst, though the best. 'It is only once in a way,' he said to her, when the long evening was over; 'to-morrow you will be as well as ever.' And so she was. It was the most natural thing in the world that both or either of them should be tired, once in a way.

The Beresfords stayed for a long time on the Continent that year. They went about to a great many places. They stayed at Baden till they were tired of the place. They went

to Dresden, because Mrs. Beresford took a fancy to see the great San Sisto picture again. Then they went on to lovely old-world Prague, and to lively Vienna, and through the Tyrol to Milan, and then back again to the Italian lakes. Wherever they went they found people whom it was pleasant to know, whom they had met before on their many journeys—people of all countries and every tongue—noble people, beautiful people, clever people—the sort of society which can only be had by taking a great deal of trouble about it, and which, even with the greatest amount of trouble, many people miss entirely. This society included ambassadors and hill-farmers, poor curés, bishops, great statesmen, and professors who were passing rich on five shillings a day: nothing was too great or too small for them; and as wherever they went they had been before, so wherever they went they found friends. Sometimes it was only a chambermaid; but, nevertheless, there she was with a pleasant human smile. And, to tell the truth, James Beresford began to be very glad of the friendly chambermaids, and to calculate more where they were to be found than upon any other kind of society; for his wife had followed her usual practice of coming without a maid, and, as her strength flagged often, he was thankful, too thankful, to have someone who would be tender of her, and care for her as he himself was not always permitted to do, and as nobody else but a woman could. Oh, how he longed to get home, while he wandered about from one beautiful spot to another, hating the fine scenery, loathing and sickening at everything he had loved! Commonplace London and the square with its comforts would have pleased him a hundred times better than lovely Como or the wild glory of the mountains; but she would not hear of going home. One day, when the solemn English of a favourite Kammer Mädchen had roused him to the intolerable nature of the situation, he had tried, indeed, with all his might to move her to return. ‘Your goot laty,’ Gretchen had said, ‘is nod—well. I ton’t untershtand your goot laty. She would be bedder, mooch bedder at ’ome, in Lonton.’ ‘I think you are right, Gretchen,’ he had said, and very humbly went in to try what he could do. ‘My love,’ he said, ‘I am beginning to get tired of the Tyrol. I should like to get home. The Societies are beginning. I see Huxley’s lectures start next week. I like to be there, you know, when all my friends are there. Shouldn’t you be pleased to get home?’

'No,' she said. She had been lying on the sofa, but got up as soon as he came in. 'You know I hate autumn in London; the fogs kill me. I can't—I can't go back to the fogs. Go yourself, James, if you please, and attend all your dear Societies, and hear Mr. Huxley. Take me to Como first, and get me rooms that look on the lake, and hire Abbondio's boat for me; and then you can go.'

'It is likely that I should go,' he said, 'without you, my darling! When did I ever leave you? But there are so many comforts at home you can't have here; and advice—I want advice. You don't get better so fast as I hoped.'

She looked at him with a strange smile. 'No; I don't get better, do I?' she said. 'Those doctors tell such lies; but I don't get worse, James; you must allow I don't get worse. I am not so strong as I thought I was; I can't go running about everywhere as I used to do. I am getting old, you know. After thirty I believe there is always a difference.'

'What nonsense, Annie! there is no difference in you. You don't get back your strength——'

'That's it; that's all. If you were to leave me quite alone and quiet, to recruit now; yes, I think I should like to know that you were in London enjoying yourself. Why shouldn't you enjoy yourself? Women get worn out sooner than men; and I don't want to cripple you, James. No; take me to Como—I have taken a fancy to Como—and then you can come back for me whenever you please.'

'I am not going to leave you,' he said, with a sigh. 'You must not be unreasonable, my darling. What pleasure would it be to me to go home without you? It was you I was thinking of; for me it is all right. I am quite happy here. As for Huxley and the rest, you don't think I care for them. It was you I was thinking of.'

'You said the Societies. Whatever you do, James, speak the truth. I suppose,' she added, with a laugh which sounded harsh, 'you are afraid I shall get very ill—die, perhaps, away from home?'

Poor man! what was he to say? 'Oh, Annie!' he cried, 'how you stab me! If I thought anything of the kind, you know I'd have Sir William here to-morrow, or any one, if it should cost me all I have. I know very well there is no danger,' he went on, taking a certain forlorn comfort out of his own bold words; 'but you don't get up your strength as

you ought, and knocking about in these bare rooms can't be good for you; and, living as we are—and you have no maid——'

'I hate a maid. I like Gretchen a great deal better. She makes so much of me.'

'Then take Gretchen with you, my dearest; take her to Como; keep her with you till you get home.'

'Oh, how like a man that is!' she said, laughing. 'Take Gretchen with me—Gretchen, who is her father's only daughter, the life and soul of the place! What would he do without Gretchen? He would have to shut up altogether. I might drop out of the world, and I would not be missed half so much as she would be. Do you know I begin to get tired of this place, and the hills, James,' she cried, starting up. 'Let us go and ask about Donato and his horses. I want to get to Como before October. Why, we'll come in for the vintage! I like the vintage; and there are advertisements everywhere about a sale at one of the villas. We shall be sure to pick up something. Is it too late to start to-day?'

'My darling, when you take a thing into your head——'

'Yes, to be sure, I like to do it all at once. I was always hot-headed. Now mind, we are to start to-morrow. I always loved Como, James; you know I always did. We went there the first year we were married. I don't call it honeymooning when we don't go to Como; and remember this is our last bout of honeymooning; we shall have Cara next year.'

She laughed, and was very gay all the evening, delighted with the idea of the change. But when he put her into Donato's big old-fashioned *vettura* next morning, and saw everything fastened on, and prepared for the long, slow journey, poor Beresford was very sad. He thought, if he could only have a long talk with Maxwell, and hear what Sir William had got to say, and know what it was that he had to fear, he should be less unhappy. There must be something, or she would not be so strange; but what was it? Almost anything was better, he thought, than fighting in the dark—fighting with ghosts, not knowing what you were afraid of. She was quite light-hearted at first, interested with the drive, and waved her hands to the hills as they went slowly out of sight. 'Good-bye,' she said, 'you dear old giants! I hope those white furs of yours will keep you warm till we bring Cara. What will Cara think of the mountains? She never saw anything bigger than Sunninghill.'

‘Sunninghill has the effect of being much higher than it is with that great level stretch of flat country. It impresses the imagination just as much as your giants. Don’t laugh, Annie; but your mountains stifle me. I never have air enough to breathe. I like miles and miles of country round me. You know my weakness.’

‘Sunninghill before the Alps!’ she cried, laughing. ‘’Tis clear you are a true cockney. Give me your shoulder for a pillow; I think I shall go to sleep.’

And so she did; and the horses jogged on and on, now slow, now fast, their bells jingling, and Donato’s whip making harmless circles and slashes over their heads; and houses and hedgerows, and slopes of mountain, flew past in a dream. James Beresford could see nothing but the wan lines of the face that rested on his shoulder, solemn in that deep sleep of weariness. How worn she was! how pale! growing whiter, he thought, and whiter, till sometimes in terror he stooped down close to make sure that the pale lips were parted by living breath.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE CHARITIES.

To live at Sunninghill, with one’s feet on a level with the highest pinnacle of the big Castle at St. George’s, what a thing it was in summer! All that country is eloquent with trees—big beeches, big oaks, straight elms, sweet birch-trees; even the very holly-bushes, in their dark green, grow tall into prickly, straggling monsters, as big as the elms. But the triumph of the place perhaps is in spring, when the primroses come too thick for counting, and the woods are full of their fairy, indefinable fragrance. In the ripe summer there was no such lovely suggestion about; all was at that perfection which suggests only decay. The wild flowers were foxgloves, with here and there in the marshy places a lingering plume of meadow-sweet. The ferns had grown too strong and tall, like little trees. The woods were in their darkest, fullest garments of green; not another leaflet to come anywhere; all full, and mature, and complete. Wild honeysuckle waved flags of yellow and brown from the high branches of big

trees, which it had caught and tangled in; and made the hedge into one big wall of flowers—almost too much when the sun was on it. In the very heart of August it was as cool in these shadowy wood-walks as in a Gothic chapel, and here and there on a little plateau of brown earth a bench underneath a tree offered rest and a view to the wayfarer. Mrs. Burchell was sitting on one of these, panting a little, on the special day we have to record. She was that rector's wife already mentioned, who was a contemporary of Cherry Beresford, and who grudged so much that 'two single women' should have all the delights of Sunninghill. She was just Miss Cherry's age, fat and fair, but more than forty, and she had seven children, and felt herself inconceivably in advance of Cherry, for whom she retained her old friendship however, modified by a little envy and a good deal of contempt. Cherry was an old maid; that of itself surely was quite enough to warrant the contempt and the envy. You had but to look at Mr. Burchell's rectory, which lay at the foot of the hill under the shadow of the woods, but facing towards the high road, which was very dusty, and exposed without a tree to the blaze of the west, and to compare it with the beautiful house on the top of the hill, sheltered so carefully, not too much nor too little—set in velvet lawns and dewy gardens, dust and noise kept at arm's length—to see the difference between them. It was a difference which Mrs. Burchell for her part could not learn not to resent; though, indeed, but for the benefice bestowed by Miss Beresford, the Burchells must have had a much worse lot, or indeed perhaps never would have united their lots at all. The rector's wife might have been as poor a creature as Miss Cherry, an old maid, and none of the seven Burchells might ever have come into being, but for the gift of that dusty Rectory from the ladies on the hill; but the rectorinn did not think of that. She was seated on the bench under the big oak, fanning herself with her handkerchief, while Agnes, her eldest daughter, and Dolly, her youngest, dutifully waited for her. They were going up to 'The Hill' for tea, which was a weekly ceremonial at least.

'At all events, mamma, you must allow,' said Agnes, 'that it is better to live at the foot of the hill than at the top. You never could take any walks if you had this long pull up every time you went out.'

'They don't have any long pull,' said her mother; 'they

have their carriage. Ah, yes, they are very different from a poor clergyman's wife, who has done her duty all her life without much reward for it. It is not those who deserve them most, or who have most need of them, who get the good things of this life, my dear. I don't want to judge my neighbours; but Miss Charity Beresford I have heard all my life was not so very much better than a heathen. It may not go so far as that—but I have seen her, with my own eyes, laugh at your papa's best sermons. I am afraid she is not far removed from the wicked that flourish like a green bay tree; yet look at her lot in life and your papa's—a gentleman, too, and a clergyman with so many opportunities of doing good—and she in this fine place, a mere old woman!

'If papa lived here should we all live here?' said Dolly, whose small brain was confused by this suggestion; 'then I should have the pony instead of Cara, and Miss Cherry would be my auntie! Oh, I wish papa lived here!'

'Hold your tongue,' said her mother. 'Cherry Beresford is a ridiculous old creature. Dear me, when I think of the time when she and I were girls together! Who would have thought that I should have been the one to toil up here in the sun, while *she* drove in her carriage. Oh, yes, that's very true, she was born the richest—but some girls have better luck than others! It was mine, you see, to marry a poor clergyman. Ah, well, I daresay Cherry would give her head to be in my place now!'

'And you in hers? Is that what you mean, mamma?'

'Me in hers! I'd like to be in her house, if that's what you mean; but me a fanciful, discontented, soured old maid—me!'

'Then, mamma dear, if you are better off in one way and she in another, you are equal,' said Agnes, somewhat crossly; 'that's compensation. Have not you rested long enough?' Agnes was in the uncomfortable position of an involuntary critic. She had been used to hear a great deal about the Miss Beresfords all her life, and only a little while before had awoke out of the tranquil satisfaction of use and wont, to wonder if all this abuse was justifiable. She stood under the tree with her back to her mother, looking out upon the view with an impatient sadness in her face. She was fond of her mother; but to hear so many unnecessary animadversions vexed and ashamed her, and the only way in which she could

show this was by an angry tone and demeanour, which sat very badly upon her innocent countenance and ingenuous looks.

Just then they heard the sound of footsteps coming towards them, and voices softly clear in the warm air. 'But, Cara, we must not be so ready to blame. All of us do wrong sometimes—not only little girls, but people who are grown up.'

'Then, Aunt Cherry, you ought not, and one ought to blame you. A little child who cannot read—yes, perhaps that ought to be excused—it does not know; but us——'

'We do wrong, too, every day, every minute, Cara. You will learn that as you grow older, and learn to be kind, I hope, and forgive.'

'I shall never learn that.'

They came within sight as these words were said. Miss Cherry, in a cool grey gown, with a broad hat which Mrs. Burchell thought far too young for her; little Cara in her white frock, the shadows speckling and waving over her, erect as a little white pillar, carrying herself so straight. They made a pretty picture coming down the brown mossy path all broken up by big roots under the cool shade of the trees. On the bank behind them were low forests of coarse fern, and a bundle of foxgloves flowering high up on a brown knoll. The cool and tranquil look of them felt almost like an insult to the hot and panting wayfarers who had toiled up the path this hot day. Mrs. Burchell was in black silk, as became her age and position; she had a great deal of dark hair, and, though she blamed Miss Cherry for it, she, too, wore a hat; but, though she had been resting for ten minutes, she was still red and panting. 'Ah, Cherry,' she said, 'how lucky you are coming downhill while we have been climbing! Some people have always the best of it. It makes me feel hotter and hotter to see you so cool and so much at your ease.'

'We have come to meet you,' said Miss Cherry, 'and we shall be equal the rest of the way, for we shall all climb. Little Dolly, will you drag me up? You are so big and so strong, and you like to help old ladies. Come.'

Dolly being a very little mite, more fit to be carried, was made very happy by this address. She stretched forth two fat, small hands, and made great pretences to drag her thin charge. 'But you must want to come, or I can't drag you,' she said.

'Dolly is a little, wise woman, and speaks proverbs and parables,' said Miss Cherry. 'Yes, dear, I want to come; but we must wait for mamma.'

'Oh, go on, you are light and airy; you have not been tried with a large family like me! You had better give me your arm, Agnes, for the rest of the way. What a pull it is! I don't think I should ever walk if I had my choice. If I could afford a pair of ponies like yours; but with so many children ponies are out of the question,' said Mrs. Burchell, still aggrieved. Miss Cherry looked wistfully at the pretty daughter upon whose arm her friend laid a heavy hand.

'Perhaps we both have something that the other would like to have,' she said, mildly. 'I believe that is the way in life.'

'Oh, it would never do for you, a single woman, to wish for children! I consider that most improper,' said the rector's wife. 'Of course we all wished for husbands in our day, and some of us were successful and some weren't; but it isn't a subject to be talked of, pardon me, my dear Cherry, before young girls.'

Miss Cherry opened her mild eyes very wide, and then she blushed a delicate, overwhelming old-maidenly blush, one of those demonstrations of feeling which are almost more exquisite in the old than in the young. She did not make any reply. Mrs. Burchell went on in her daughter's ear: 'She is an old fool—look at her. Blushing! as if she were a young girl.'

'I can't blush when I please, mamma,' said Agnes; 'neither, I suppose, can she. Lean on me a little heavier; we shall soon get to the top now.'

'Why, she *runs* actually,' said poor Mrs. Burchell. 'She is as light as Dolly; she doesn't mind the hill. So, Cara, your papa and mamma have gone away again? Why don't they take you with them? I should think you are old enough now to go too. How different people are! Now, I can never bear to be separated from my children. I like them to go everywhere with me. It is quite astonishing the difference. Doesn't your Aunt Charity think it strange that they should always send you here?'

'Aunt Charity likes to have me,' said Cara; 'for mamma travels very fast, and I should get very tired. I think I like the Hill best. Mamma is not very strong, and I should have to stop all my lessons.'

'But you would not mind that, I should think. My girls are always so glad to get lessons over. They would go mad with joy to have their month's holiday, and I am sure so would you.'

'No,' said Cara; 'I am nearly twelve, and I can only play three or four tunes, and talk a little French with Aunt Cherry. We pronounce very badly,' she continued, with a blush. 'I know by the French people who come to see us in the Square.'

'You poor child! do you mean to say they let you stay up at night, and hear people talking in the drawing-room? How very wrong for you, both for your mind and health! that is what makes you so thin, I am sure; and you must hear a great many things that you ought not to hear.'

Cara opened her blue eyes very wide. She was on the whole gratified by the idea that she had heard things she ought not to hear. That perhaps accounted for her superior wisdom which she felt in herself.

'Mamma says I ought to learn to judge for myself,' she said, with dignity. 'When there is an argument going on I like to listen, and often she makes me tell her what I thought, and which side I take.'

Mrs. Burchell gave Agnes a significant look; and Agnes, it must be allowed, who heard little conversation which did not turn on personal subjects, was slightly horrified too.

'Poor child!' repeated the rector's wife; 'at your age!—and what kind of subjects do they talk about? It must be very bad for you.'

'Oh, about books chiefly,' said Cara, 'and pictures—but I don't understand pictures—and sometimes about politics. I like that—about Ireland and Mr. Gladstone they talked once. And to hear the Frenchmen talk about Ireland—just as if it were Poland, papa said.'

'Well, I am sure it could not be much worse,' Mrs. Burchell said, after a pause of alarm. She did not know much about Ireland, except that they shot landlords there, and that when she advertised for a housemaid she said 'No Irish need apply;' and she knew nothing at all about Poland, and what the analogy was between them she had not an idea. She looked at Cara after this with a little awe; but naturally held fast by her censure, which no doubt must be just, though she could not tell how.

'It cannot be good for you to hear such talk as that,' she said. 'A good romp and go to bed at eight o'clock, that is what I hold with for my girls. You are a great deal too old for your age. Before you are eighteen, people will be taking you for five-and-twenty. To hear you talk, one would think you were eighteen now.'

'I wish they would,' said Cara; 'I don't like to be always thought a child. I have often things I want to say just on my very lips. I know I could set the people right if I might but speak. But mamma holds up her finger, and I dare not. If I were eighteen, I should be grown up, and I might give my opinion—and twenty-five! Is Agnes twenty-five?'

'Agnes! you spiteful little thing!' cried the mother, getting redder and redder. Agnes was sixteen, and the eldest of five, so that to add anything to her age was very undesirable. Cara was too much bewildered to ask what it was which made her a 'spiteful little thing,' for just then they came to the final plateau, where the path reached the level of the lawn. And there, snipping away at her roses, was Miss Beresford herself, in a deep sun-bonnet and garden gloves, with a large pair of scissors in her hand, and two baskets at her feet. The roses were in the full flush of their second bloom, notwithstanding their mistress's fears. She was snipping off the withered flowers, the defective buds, and yellow leaves on one hand, and here and there making a savage dash at a sound twig infested by a colony of green flies, while she cut roses for the decoration of the room. One of the baskets was filled with these flowers, and Miss Cherry, who had preceded them, had lifted this basket from the path, and was looking at it with a perplexed face.

'There's a "Malmaison" which is perfect,' said Miss Charity; 'and as for those "Giant of Battles"—' She liked to pronounce their names in her own way, scorning pretence, as she said; and she put down her nose into the basket with true satisfaction. The one thing in the world Miss Charity was a little 'off her head' about was a fine rose.

'They are fine flowers,' said Miss Cherry, very seriously, her soft voice relaxing, with no smile; 'but the stalks are so short! How am I to arrange them? unless you put them bolt upright, each one by itself, as they are in a rose show?'

'You don't think I'm going to sacrifice my buds,' said Miss Charity; 'never! I see you do it, and that dolt of a

gardener, and it goes to my heart. Put them bolt upright; what could be better? or they do very well in flat dishes. You can't go wrong with roses; but sacrifice my buds—not for the world!

‘There is not one long enough to put in one's belt,’ said Miss Cherry, who looked half disposed to cry. ‘We have more roses than any one, but they never look nice, for they never have any stalks. I must think what is to be done. The flat dishes are not effective, and the pyramids are wearisome, and specimen glasses make the table like a child's garden.’

‘There's a dinner party to-night,’ said Miss Beresford; ‘that's why Cherry is put out. Come to the arbour and sit down, you poor hot people. How very hot you look, to be sure. That is what it is to be stout. Neither Cherry nor I are stout, and it is a great advantage to us, especially in summer. Come, Maria, you shall have some tea.’

‘I don't consider myself stout,’ said Mrs. Burchell, offended. ‘The mother of a large family naturally develops a little. “It would not do, my dear, if you were as slim as you were at twenty,” my husband says to me; “only old maids are thin :” and if *he* likes it——’

‘Yes; you see we're all old maids here,’ said Miss Charity, with one of her hearty laughs. Her handsome old face shone cool at the bottom of the deep tunnel of her sun-bonnet, clear red and white, as if she had been twenty; and with large, blue, undimmed eyes, from which little Cara had taken hers, and not from either father's or mother's. Cara, indeed, was considered by everybody ‘the very image’ of Miss Charity, and copied her somewhat, it must be allowed, in a longer step and more erect carriage than was common to little girls. Miss Charity put down her scissors in her other basket, while Miss Cherry bent her reflective and troubled countenance over the roses, and drew off her big garden gloves, and led the way to the arbour or bower, which was not so cockney an erection as its name portended. At that height, under the shadow of a group of big fragrant limes, in which two openings cleverly cut revealed the broad beautiful plain below, one with St. George's noble Castle in the midst of the leafy frame, the air was always fresh and sweet. By stretching your neck, as all the young Burchells knew, you could see the dusty road below, and the Rectory lying deep down in the shadow of the

trees; but not a speck of dust made its way up to the soft velvet lawn, or entered at the ever-opened windows. 'Ah, yes, there's our poor little place, children; a very different place from this!' Mrs. Burchell said, plaintively, as she sat down and began to fan herself once more.

'You once thought it a very nice little place, Maria,' said Miss Charity. 'I am afraid you are getting tired of the rector, good man——'

'I?' said Mrs. Burchell, 'tired of my husband! You little know him or me, or you would not say such a thing. Nobody except those who have a husband like mine can understand what a blessing it is——'

'We don't keep anything of the kind up here,' said Miss Charity; 'and here comes the tea. Cherry has gone in to have a cry over her roses. When one has not one thing to trouble about, one finds another. You because your house is not so big as ours; she because I cut the roses too short. We are but poor creatures, the best of us. Well, what's the news, Maria? I always expect a budget of news when I see you.'

The rector's wife, offended, began by various excuses, as that she was the last person in the world to hear anything, and that gossips knew better than to bring tales to her; but in the end unfolded her stores and satisfied Miss Charity, who took a lively interest in her fellow-creatures, and loved to hear everything that was going on. By the time this recital was fairly begun Miss Cherry came back, carrying with her own hands a bowl of creamy milk for little Dolly, who clung to her skirts and went with her wherever she went. Mrs. Burchell sat in the summer-house, which afforded a little shelter, and was safer as well as more decorous than the grass outside. When Cherry sat down with the children, Agnes had her gossip, too, to pour into the gentle old maiden's sympathetic ears. Agnes was in the crotchety stage of youth, when the newly-developed creature wants to be doing something for its fellows. She had tried the school and the parish, not with very great success. She wanted Miss Cherry to tell her what to do. 'The schoolmistress can teach the girls better than I can. She shrugs her shoulders at me. She is certificated, and knows everything; and the old women are not at their ease. They talk about my dear papa, and what a beautiful sermon it was last Sunday. And mamma is busy with her

housekeeping. Couldn't you tell me, dear Miss Cherry, anything a girl can do?' Miss Cherry somehow was a girl herself, though she was old. It was more natural to appeal to her than even to mamma.

Dolly for her part drank her milk, and dipped her biscuit in it, and made 'a figure' of herself unnoticed by anybody, carrying on a monologue of her own all the time. And Cara sat on the lawn, with the leaves playing over her, flecking her pretty head and white frock with a perpetual coming and going of light and shadow. Cara said nothing to any one. She was looking out with her blue eyes well open, through the branches over big St. George's, upon that misty blueness which was the world.

CHAPTER V.

COMING HOME.

THEY stayed in Como till late in October, now here, now there, as caprice guided their steps. Sometimes Mrs. Beresford would be pleased to be quiet, to float about the lake in the boat, doing nothing, taking in the air and the sunshine; or to sit at her window watching the storms that would sometimes come with little warning, turning the lovely Italian lake in a moment into a wild Highland loch—a transformation which always delighted her. She liked the storms, until one day a boat was upset, which had a great effect upon her mind. The people about her thought her heartless in her investigations into this accident, which threw several poor families into dire trouble and sorrow.

'Would the men die directly?' she asked; 'or would they have time to think and time to struggle?'

Her husband reminded her of the common idea that all the scenes of your life came before you, as in a panorama, when you were drowning. 'I should not like that,' she said, with a shiver. Then Abbondio interposed, he to whom the boat belonged which the Beresfords hired, and told how he had been drowned once.

'They brought me back,' he said; 'and I shall have to

die twice now, which is hard upon a man; for I was gone; if they had not brought me back, I should never have known anything more. No, Signora, I did not see all that had happened in my life. I felt only that I had slipped the net, and was grasping and grasping at it, and could not get it.'

'That was painful,' she said, eagerly.

'It was a confusion,' said the fisherman.

Mrs. Beresford called to her husband to give him some money for the poor widows who had lost their men in the boat. 'A confusion!' she said to herself, dreamily. It was a very still day after the storm, and she had been looking with a strange wistfulness at the soft blue ripples of the water which had drowned these men. 'A confusion! How strange it is that we know so little about dying! A lingering death would be good for that, that you could write it down hour by hour that others might know.'

'One would not be able,' said her husband; 'besides, I think everything gets misty; and one ceases to be interested about other people. I don't much believe those stories that represent passionate feeling in the dying. The soul gets languid. Did I ever tell you what a friend of mine said who was dead like Abbondio till the doctors got hold of her and forced her back?'

'No,' she said, growing very pale; 'tell me, James.'

'She told me that she felt nothing that was painful, but as if she was floating away on the sea somewhere about Capri, where she had once been. Do you remember the sea there, how blue it is about those great Faraglioni rocks? And there she was floating—floating—not suffering; mind and body, all softly afloat; until they got hold of her, as I say, and forced her back.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Beresford, with a shiver; 'I should not like to be forced back. Poor soul! She will have to die once again some time; but if it was only like that, she will not be much afraid.'

'She was as far gone as she could go, to come back, I have heard. What queer talk this is, my darling! The accident has spoiled all our pleasure.'

'No; it is pleasant talk. I like that idea of floating; it is better, far better, than Abbondio's confusion; but that, I suppose, was because of the suddenness in his case, and clutching at something perhaps as he got into the water. It was

not an accident with her, was it? She was dying of an illness as we poor women do.'

'And most men, Annie; the greater part of us all.'

'Yes, yes; I know. Poor woman! And they brought her back?'

'Her family was round her bed, my darling, praying for her life, asking nothing but to get her back. You don't consider her children, and her husband. Don't let us talk of it. It makes me think of jumping into this wicked lake, and getting it all over.'

'Ah! do you feel that *too*? It is wicked, James; how dare you think such things? Take me back home; yes, home. I am tired of this place. It is all very well when it is fine, but winter is coming. To-morrow let us go home.'

He took her to the shore with a few long sweeps of the oars, glad in his heart of that decision. He, too, was very tired of the place; more tired of the eternal shining than of the storm, and it was getting late in the year for the Alps. Nevertheless it was by the Alps that this capricious woman insisted upon returning, and they had something very near an accident in the snows which roused and pleased her mightily. After the excitement, however, nothing would satisfy her but to rush to London with the utmost speed. She objected to stay even a single night in Paris. She had been seized with a passion of longing for the humdrum Square.

Miss Cherry brought Cara up from Sunninghill to be at home to receive her mother. But the pair of travellers had stolen a march upon the household, and instead of waiting to be received in a proper manner in the evening, with dinner ready and everything comfortable, had arrived at an absurd hour in the morning, before the maids were out of bed, and when there was nothing prepared in the house. Cook herself came, much aggrieved, to tell Miss Cherry this, while Cara ran upstairs to her mother's room. 'I don't make no doubt as folks get very fanciful when they're ill; but still, Miss, there's reason in all things. At six o'clock in the morning, and we not up, as why should we be, not thinking of nothing of the sort, and not a thing in the house?'

'It was hard, cook,' said the sympathetic Miss Cherry; 'but then you know my brother had a right to come to his own house when he pleased. Coming home is not like going anywhere else. But I hope Mrs. Beresford is looking better?'

'Better!' said cook, spreading out her hands; and Sarah, the housemaid, shook her head and put her apron to her eyes.

'Dear, dear!' said kind Miss Cherry, appalled by their tears; 'but travelling all night makes any one look ill. I shall not go up until she has had a good look at her child. Miss Cara is like a little rose.'

'So she is, Miss, bless her!' assented the maids; and Cherry had to wait for a long time in the library before even her brother came to her. One thing which struck her with great surprise was, that there were no boxes about half emptied, in which precious fragilities had been packed in straw and wicker cases. The Buen Retiro cup was the only thing they had bought, and that was among Mrs. Beresford's things—smashed; and they had both forgotten its very existence. No more wonderful sign could have been of the changed times.

When Miss Cherry in her turn was introduced into the bedroom in which Mrs. Beresford still lay, resting herself, she all but cried out with sudden panic. She only just stopped herself in time; her mouth was open; her tongue in the very act of forming the 'Oh!' when her brother's look stopped her. Not that he saw what she was going to say, or all the effect his wife's changed looks had upon her. He himself had got used to them. He asked her, half aside, 'How do you think she is looking?' with an eager look in his eyes.

'She is looking—tired,' said Miss Cherry. 'Most people do after travelling all night. I could not have lifted my head from the pillow; but Annie had always so much spirit.'

'Yes; she has no end of spirit,' said poor James Beresford, looking admiringly at his wife. He flattered himself, poor fellow! that Cherry had not remarked the thinness of the worn face, beside which her own faintly-coloured old maid's countenance almost looked fresh and round and blooming. He had been alarmed at the thought of what 'they' would think of her looks; but now his spirits rose. Cherry did not seem to have remarked it; and what a hypocrite poor Cherry felt, sitting there smiling, with her heart sinking more and more every moment! 'What will he do without his wife?' she was asking herself. And, alas! that wife's worn looks; her fretful little outbursts of impatience; all her caprices and restlessness betrayed a progress of evil more rapid than any one had even feared.

'Does Mr. Maxwell know you have come back? He will want to see you. He was always so anxious to have news of you,' she said, falteringly.

'We have forgotten what doctors are like,' said Mrs. Beresford. 'I don't want ever to renew my acquaintance with them. James, send him a note, and let him come to dinner. Yes, Cara! What has my pet got to say?'

'You said two different things at once, mamma—that you did not want to see doctors again, and that Mr. Maxwell was to come to dinner.'

'I told you she was an idealist,' said Mrs. Beresford, smiling. Then changing—as she had got into a way of doing,—in a moment, she added, 'Get down from the bed, Cara; you tire me. There, sit there, further back. Children flutter so; they are always in motion. Cherry is still—she is a comfort; and, James, Mrs. Meredith can come, if she likes to come before I get up. She is a soft, tranquil woman, like Cherry; silly, perhaps, but that does not matter. When one is over tired, silly people who don't fatigue one are the best——'

'I wonder does she think me silly?' Miss Cherry said to herself; and it is to be feared there was not much doubt on the subject. After she had made this speech about Mrs. Meredith, next door, the invalid sent them all away, that she might rest. This was no more than a passing fancy, like other notions that flitted across her restless brain. They went down softly to the library, avoiding by common consent the drawing-room, which was *her* room, and so closely associated with all her ways. There James Beresford interrogated his sister very closely. 'You don't see a very great change—nothing more than you expected?' He was tired, too, poor fellow! worn out in body and in soul.

'I think you should see Mr. Maxwell at once,' said Miss Cherry, who was timid, and did not like to commit herself. 'What does it matter what I think, who don't know? I think she is perhaps—more worn than I expected; but then she has been travelling all night. Perhaps you ought not to have allowed her to do so much.'

'I? How could I help it? and I was too thankful to get home. How I hate those pleasure places! the more beautiful they are, the more terrible. I detest them. I shall never be able to endure mountains and lakes again—till Annie is better,

he added, with such a miserable pretence at a smile that his kind sister almost broke down. She made up her mind to remain at his entreaty, though both of them had a doubt whether the invalid would like it. 'Annie will be pleased, I am sure,' he said, with hesitation. How well they all understood her! But quiet Miss Cherry felt no anger with the fanciful, capricious, suffering woman, who meant happiness in this house, notwithstanding all her uncertain moods and ways.

'I will tell her I have something to do in town, and ask her to give me a bed for a few nights.'

'Aunt Cherry, you had nothing to do when we started; you meant to go home to-day.'

'Yes, Cara; but I should like to see your mamma get a little better.'

'Then please tell her so,' said the child; '*please* tell her so. I know what you think. You think she is very, very ill; but you will not say it. You try to deceive papa and me, and her too. I cannot bear to be deceived.'

'My dear, some time or other you will learn to know that one must not say everything one thinks; though indeed, indeed, I would always have you say the truth.'

'I shall never learn not to say what I think,' said the little girl, with erect head and severe blue eyes fixed upon her aunt disapprovingly. Miss Cherry was nervous and easily disturbed. She could not bear even Cara's disapproval, and she began to cry in spite of herself, even then not quite ingenuously she felt; for her disturbed nerves and her distress and sympathy for her brother were at the bottom of her emotion, though Cara's severity gave an immediate reason for her tears.

Mrs. Beresford was better in the evening, and came down to dinner, putting on one of her prettiest dresses in honour of the return. 'I have worn nothing but grey alpaca for months,' she said; 'like you, Cherry; I am quite glad to get out of it, and feel at home again. We have had rather a long spell of honeymooning this time, and we were beginning to get tired of each other; but it was the last, you know, for Cara is to go with us next year.'

Cara, who was sitting by, began to speak. 'If——,' she said, and then stopped, arrested in spite of herself by such a passionate look as she had never seen before in her father's eyes.

'If—what? You think I shall change my mind? Ah, Mr. Maxwell, how do you do! Am I feeling strong? Well, not strong, perhaps, but very well to-night. I have ups and downs. And poor James there, whom I have punished severely, will tell you I have grown the most fanciful, troublesome, capricious woman. James!'

He had taken Cara into a corner, and was whispering to her in a voice which made the child tremble: 'If you say a word! if you vex your mother or frighten her with that idiotic sincerity of yours, by Heaven I'll kill you!' he said, clenching his hand. 'Capricious! Yes, you never saw anything like it, Maxwell. Such a round as she has led me—such a life as I have had!' And he laughed. Heaven help them! they all laughed, pretending to see the joke. While the child in the corner, her little frame thrilling in every nerve with that strange, violent whisper, the first roughness that had ever come her way, sat staring at the group in a trance of wonder. What did it mean? Why were they false all of them, crying when she was not there, pretending to laugh as soon as they turned to her. It was Cara's first introduction to the mysteries of life.

That night when Miss Cherry had cried herself almost blind, after a stolen interview with the doctor in the passage as he left the house, she was frightened nearly out of her wits by a sudden apparition. It was late, for Cherry, though used to early hours, had not been able to think of sleep after the doctor's melancholy shake of the head and whisper of 'I fear the worst.' She was sitting sadly thinking of what that pretty house would be with the mistress gone. What would become of James? Some men have work to occupy them. Some men are absorbed in the outdoor life which makes a woman less a companion to them, perpetual and cherished; but James! Cherry Beresford was so different a woman from her sister-in-law, that the affection between them had been limited, and almost conventional—the enforced union of relations, not anything spontaneous; for where mutual understanding is not, there cannot be much love. But this did not blind her perception as to what his wife was to James. She herself had not been very much to him, nor he to her. They had loved each other calmly, like brother and sister, but they had not been companions since they were children. Cherry, who was very simple and true, not deceiving herself any more

than other people, knew very well that she could never fill for him anything of the place his wife had left vacant. Her heart would bleed for him; but that was all—and what would become of him? She shivered and wept at the thought, but could think of nothing—nothing! What would poor James do?

Then Cara came stalking in upon her in her nightgown, with a candle in her hand, white and chill as a little ghost, her face very pale, her brown hair hanging about her shoulders, her white bare feet showing below her night-dress, all lighted up by the candle she carried. 'I have come to ask you what it all means,' the child said; 'none of you say what is true. You laugh when I can see you are more like crying, and you make jokes, and you tell—lies. Have you all gone mad, Aunt Cherry? or what does it mean?'

Upon this a little burst of impatience came to Miss Cherry, which was an ease to her over-wrought feelings. 'You disagreeable, tiresome little child! How dare you make yourself a judge of other people? Are you so wise or so sensible that you should be able to say exactly what is right and what is wrong? I wonder at you, Cara! When you see us unhappy, all upset and miserable, about your poor mamma.'

'But why? To tell me—lies, will that make her well?'

'You should have been whipt,' cried the indignant lady. 'Oh, you should have been whipt when you were a small child, and then you never would have dared to speak so to me, and to your poor father, whose heart is broken! Would you like us to go and tell her how ill she is, and beg of her to make haste and die? Poor, poor Annie! that is what would be best for her, to get rid of the pain. Is that what you would like us to do?'

'Oh, Aunt Cherry, Aunt Cherry! don't say that mamma—that mamma——'

'No, my darling, I can't say it,' cried Miss Cherry, drawing the child into her arms, kissing and crying over her. 'I won't say it. I'll never, never give up hope. Doctors are deceived every day. Nobody can tell what may happen, and God hears prayers when we pray with all our hearts. But that's why we hide our feelings, Cara; why we laugh, dear, when we would like to cry; why we try to talk as if we were happy when we are very sad; for she would give up hope if she once knew——'

'And would that make any difference?' said the child, in all the impenetrability of wonder, one revelation bursting upon her after another, feeling this new dark mysterious world beyond her powers.

'Would hope make any difference?' cried Miss Cherry. 'Oh, child, how little you know! It is hope that makes all the difference. If you think things are going well, it helps them to go well—it keeps up your strength, it cheers your heart, it makes you a different creature. Everything, everything, lies in keeping up hope.'

'I don't understand,' said Cara, slowly. She had pushed open a door unawares into a spiritual world of which she knew nothing. She had not one of the happy superficial natures which sail over mysteries. That which was deeper than fact and truer than truth was a perplexity and aching wonder to the child. She could not fathom it, she had but just discovered it. She stood quite still while Miss Cherry explained to her as well as she could how nothing must be said or done that would alarm the patient, how everything must be made smooth and kept cheerful round her. 'And, Cara, you will remember—you will say nothing to frighten her, whatever you may hear. If she should suffer very much, you must always look as if you felt sure she would soon be better.'

'Even if it is not true?'

'Oh, my dear child! the only way to mend that is to pray to God day and night, day and night, to make it true! He can and He will—or, oh, Cara! we hope He will,' cried Miss Cherry, with tears. 'And you can help by always praying, and always being cheerful. Look at your poor papa, how he smiles and jokes, and his heart is breaking all the time.'

'His heart is breaking!' said Cara, under her breath.

'But if we all do what we can, and are cheerful, and trust in God, she may get better, dear. There is so much we can do. That is how I try to keep up my heart. We must never look frightened, never let her get alarmed. Keep cheerful, cheerful, Cara, whatever we do.'

The child went back to bed with her head buzzing full of strange thoughts. She knew very well that nurse had often exhorted her to patience under toothache, for instance, as the best cure; but it never had been cured by that in Cara's experience. Was cheerfulness likely to answer in her mother's case,

and smiles instead of crying, and people saying things they did not believe? Such knowledge was too high for her. It confused her head, and made it ache and throb with the multitude of her thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONSULTATION.

'Yes, Miss Carry, if you like. Your dear mamma is falling into a doze; and I don't wonder, poor dear, after all those doctors a-poking and fingering. Oh, it turns my heart sick! If I don't get a breath of air I'll die. Sit in the corner, honey, behind the curtains. Don't you tease her, nor talk to her; if she wants anything, ring the bell. There now, my darling, don't say as you haven't got your way. How that child has worried to get into the room!' said nurse, confidentially, as she went soft-footed and noiseless downstairs, with an anxious maid in attendance. 'But a sick-room ain't a place for a child. It's bad enough for the like of me.'

'Yes, poor soul! I can't think how you stand it night and day as you do,' said Sarah the housemaid, under her breath.

'Bless you, I'm used to it,' she said; 'but there's things as I can't bear. Them doctors a-staring and a-poking, and looking as if they knowed everything. What do they know more than me? It's experience does it, not their Latin and their wise looks. I know well enough what they'll say—and I could have said it myself and welcome, 'stead of taking all that money out of master's pocket, as can't do good to nobody. I'd have said it as easy as they could—allowing as it's any good to say it, which is what I can't see.'

'What is it then, nurse?' said Sarah. 'It seems awkward like, when folks comes with kind inquiries, never to know no more nor the door you're opening. But I won't say a word,' she added, contradictory but coaxing, 'if you mind.'

'I'll warrant as you won't,' said nurse; and so disappeared down the kitchen stairs to snatch that cup of tea which is the saving of poor women. 'And make it strong, do, or I can't go through with it much longer,' she said, throwing herself into a chair.

This was some months after the home-coming of the invalid. Mrs. Beresford had rallied, and spent a pleasant Christmas with her friends round her once more, and she recovered her looks a little, and raised high hopes in all those who watched her so curiously. But just as spring began to touch the Square, and the crocuses appeared, a sudden and rapid relapse had come on, and to-day there had been a consultation of the doctors of a kind which could not be mistaken, so deeply serious was it. They were in Mr. Beresford's study while nurse went downstairs, and he had just been called in solemnly from the next room to hear her fate, which implied his own. She had dropped into an uneasy sleep when her trial was over, too tired and worn out to be capable of more; and it was during this moment that nurse had yielded to Cara's entreaties, made through the half-open door. The child had not seen her mother all day, and her whole being was penetrated by the sense of anxiety and foreboding that was in the house. She had wandered up and down the staircase all the time the doctors had been about, and her little, anxious face affected nurse with pity. It was the best thing for Cara to take the watch by her mother's side during this moment of suspense, as it was the best thing for nurse to get out of the sick-room and refresh herself with change. Nurse's heart was heavy too, but not with suspense. There had been no mystery to her in the growing illness. She was an 'old-fashioned servant'—alas! of a very old-fashioned sort indeed; for few in any age, we fear, are those poetical retainers whose service is given for duty, not for need. Nurse served not for duty, indeed; to which word she might have objected—for was it not the duty 'of them as she had done everything for' to look after her, as much as hers to look after them?—but for love, which is a more effectual argument. She liked her good wages and her comforts, as an honest woman has a right to do; but she liked the 'family' better still, and cared not very much for any other family, not even that with which she was herself connected in the capacity of sister and aunt—for, though she had been married, she had no children of her own. Mrs. Beresford had been her child; then, so long after, Cara. Her heart was concentrated in those two. But after this trial of the medical examination, which was almost as hard upon her as upon her mistress, nurse was very thankful to take advantage of that door, and escape for a little into the more

cheerful world of the kitchen, with all its coming and going, and the cup of tea which cook, sympathetic and curious, and very anxious to hear all that could be heard, made for her with such friendly care.

Thus little Cara stole in and established herself noiselessly in the corner by her mother's bedside, hidden by the curtains. Many and strange had been the thoughts in the child's head through these winter months, since her parents came home. She had lived a very quiet life for a child since ever she could remember, though it was a happy life enough; and the curious baby rigidity of the little code of morals which she had formed for herself had been unbroken up to that time. Cara had felt that, whosoever did wrong ought to be hanged, beheaded, burnt, or whatsoever penalty was practicable, at once, without benefit of clergy. A lie being the worst possible offence that ever came within her ken, had been as murder in the swift and sudden vengeance of her thoughts. The offence had been considered capital, beyond the reach of pardon or extenuation. It is impossible to tell what horrible overthrow of all her canons ensued when her father and aunt not only sanctioned, but enforced, lying upon her, and boldly avowed their practice of it themselves as a duty. Cara had lost herself for a long time after that. She had wandered through that bottomless darkness for months, and now had only just come to a glimmering of daylight again by aid of the individual argument, that though truth was necessary for the world in general, modifications were permitted in cases where people were ill—in the case of mamma being ill, which was the immediate thing before her. It was the one evil she was individually cognisant of in the world; but the thing was to accept it, not struggle against it, as guilt which was justified by necessity. Cara felt that here was one thing upon which more light would come as one grew older—a prospect which generally this little idealist treated with the contempt it deserves. Mamma would be better then, she thought, and the world get back into its due balance and equilibrium without any one being the worse. Probably now that time was soon approaching, now that the doctors had come and found what was the matter, and probably very soon, Cara hoped, the worst of all her difficulties would be removed; and upon this doubtful subject she would be able to get the opinion of the individual on whose behalf the others were defying Heaven with so much

horrible daring, of mamma herself, for whom the sun and moon were being made to stand still, and all the world was put out of joint for the time. This hope was in her thoughts as she took her seat in nurse's big, softly-cushioned chair, which never creaked nor made any noise, and sat there as still as a mouse, sometimes not unlike a mouse, peeping round the corner of the curtain at her charge, who lay half buried among the pillows which her restlessness had thrown into disorder, with little starts and twitches of movement, and now and then a broken moan. Worn as she was, there was still beauty in the face—white and sharpened with pain, with red hectic spots upon it, like stains on the half-transparent flesh. Her hair had been pushed away under a cap, which had come loose, and only half confined the soft golden brown locks, which had not lost their lustre; she had thrown out one arm from under the bedclothes, which lay on the white coverlet, an ivory hand, half visible only through the lace and needle-work of the sleeve. With what wondering awe and pity Cara looked at her—pity which was inexpressible, like all profound childish sentiments! Poor mamma! who suffered as she? for whom else did God permit the laws of truth to be broken? She was very fond of her beautiful mother, proud of her, and oh, so piteously sorry for her. Why should she be ill—she who hated it so much? Cara herself now and then was ill, and had to put up with it, without making any fuss. But mamma was different. The still child watched with a pity which was unfathomable, and beyond the reach of words.

The room was very still; it was at the back of the house, looking out upon nothing but gardens; so quiet that you could not have thought you were within reach of the full torrent of London life. The little *pétitement* of the fire, the occasional soft falling of the ashes, the ticking of the small, soft-toned clock, were the only audible sounds. It was a warm spring afternoon, and, but that Mrs. Beresford liked to see it, there was no need for a fire. It made the room warm and drowsy. How it was that, amid all her confused and troubled thoughts, such a reflective child as little Cara should have got drowsy too, who can tell? The stillness and quiet were unusual to her. She was leaning back against nurse's chair, her feet curled up, her small frame entirely contained within it, her mother sleeping beside her, the room very still, with

those soft rhythms of periodic sound. All at once she came to herself in a moment, after a lapse, the duration of which she knew nothing of. It was the sound of voices which roused her. Her mother speaking—her father, though how he got there she could not tell, standing very haggard and pale, in front of the fire.

'You said you would tell me—oh, tell me the truth! I am tired of waiting, and of uncertainty. James, in pity, the truth!'

'Yes, my darling; but they came—to no decision. It is so long since Sir William saw you. You could not bear him, you know. He must come again—he must have time——'

'James! You are not telling me the truth!'

Cara saw that her father turned round to the fire, and held out his hands to it, as if he were cold. That change made his voice sound further away. 'Annie, Annie! do you think I would deceive you?' he said, faltering. Neither of them knew that the child was there behind the curtain, but of that Cara never thought.

'What did they say?' she cried. 'Oh, yes, you deceive me: you do nothing but deceive me; and now, at least, I must know the truth. I will send for Maxwell to come back, and he will tell me—he is honest, not like you. James, James! have you no love for me left? You did love me once—and promised. What did they say? I *know* they have told you. You cannot hide it from me—it is in your face.'

He made no answer, but stooped down over the fire, so that his very profile might be hid from her. She could not see anything, he thought, in his shoulders—and yet the tremor in his frame, the very gesture told more plainly than words. She sat up in her bed, growing wild with eager energy. Her cap fell back, which had been loose before, and her long hair streamed over her shoulders. 'Bring me the medicine-box, quick, quick!' she cried. He ran to obey her, glad of the diversion, and knowing how often she had paroxysms of pain, which had to be stilled at all hazards. The neat little medicine-chest, with its orderly drawers and shelves, like a toy in tiny regularity and neatness, was kept in a closet at the other end of the room. He brought it out, and put it down on the table by her bedside. 'Is it the usual pain?' he said, his voice trembling. And now she could see all the misery in

his haggard face. She clutched with her white, feverish fingers at his arm.

'Tell me. You have heard—oh, I can see, you have heard—tell me, what do they say?'

He tried for a moment to get free; but what was the use? His face, all quivering with miserable excitement, his heavy eyes that would not look her in the face, his lips; not steady enough even to frame an excuse, were more telling than any words. She devoured his face with her strained eyes, holding him by his sleeve. Then, with a convulsive shiver, 'It is as I thought. I see what it is,' she cried.

'O my darling!' he said, sinking down on his knees by her bedside. 'What do they know? They are mistaken every day. How often have we said that, you and I? Why should we make gods of them now? Annie! we never believed in doctors, you and I!'

'I believe in them now,' she said. All her excitement had faded from her. The hectic red had disappeared from her cheeks, a convulsive shivering was all that remained of her strong excitement and emotion. She was hushed by the certainty. No doubt was in her mind as to the truth of it. There was silence for a moment—a long, long time, as it seemed; and when the silence was broken, it was she who spoke, not in complaint or despair, but with a strange, chill wonder and reflective pain. 'There are some people who would not have minded so much,' she said, in a half whisper. 'Some people do not feel the pain so much—or—the loathing. O my God, my God, *me!*' What could be said? Hard sobs shook the man's helpless frame. He could do nothing for her—and she was dearer to him than his life.

'Do not cry,' she said, as if she had been talking to a child; 'that hurts me more. Don't you remember when we talked of it—if it ever came to this, James—and I made you promise. You promised. Surely, surely, you must remember? In summer, before we went away.'

He tried to look at her blankly, as if he did not know what she meant; but, God help him, he remembered every word.

'Yes; you know what I mean. I can see it in your eyes. You can't deceive me now, James! you promised!'

'Never! never!' he said, his voice broken with passionate sobs.

‘I think you promised; but at least you said it was right—no wickedness in it. Oh, do it, James! You can save me still. Why should I have any more pain, now? I could bear it if it was for any good; but why should I *now*, James?’

‘I cannot, I cannot,’ he cried; ‘do not ask me. Myself, if you will, but not you—not you!’

‘Yourself!’ she said, with a dreamy contempt. In her deadly danger and despair she was somehow raised above all creatures who had no warrant of death in them. ‘Why yourself? You are safe; there is no vulture coming to gnaw *your* flesh. O James, have you not the heart of a man to save me! Think if it had been in India, in the Mutiny—and you said it would be right.’

‘How could I know?’ cried the unhappy man, with the artlessness of despair; ‘how could I tell it was coming to us? I did not think what I was saying. I thought of others—strangers. Annie! oh, let me go!—let me go!’

‘Think a moment,’ she said, still holding him; ‘think what it will be. Torment! It is hard to bear now, but nothing to what it will be—and worse than torment. You will sicken at me; the place will be unendurable. O God! James, save me! oh, save me! It would be so easy—nothing but a dose, a drink—and all safe. James! James!’

The man burst out into terrible tears—he was beyond the stage at which self-restraint exists—but as for her, she was calm. It was she who held the chief place in this conflict. He was but secondary. The day, the moment was for him but one of many; his life would flow on the same as before, but hers had to stop if not now, yet immediately. She had her sentence delivered to her. And suddenly a fever of longing woke up in her—a desire to taste this strange death, at once to anticipate fate, like that vertigo which makes shipwrecked people plunge into the sea to meet their end a few minutes before it comes inevitably, forestalling it, not waiting for it. She rushed all at once into sudden energy and excitement.

‘Come,’ she cried, with a breathlessness which was half taste, half from the sudden acceleration of her heart. ‘Come; this is the moment. There could be no time as good as now. I am not unhappy about it; nor sorry. It is like champagne. James, if you love me, do it at once; do it now!’

He made no reply, but clung to the bed, hiding his face;

with a convulsive shivering all over him. Was it that the excitement in her communicated itself to him, and that he was tempted to obey? There was a singing and a buzzing in his ears. Despair and misery stupefied him. Sooner or later she was to be taken from him: now, or a few weeks, a few months hence through a burning path of torture. And he could make it easy. Was it a devil or an angel that tugged at his heart, and echoed what she said?

‘Come,’ she said, in soft tones of pleading, ‘cannot you see? I am in the right mind now. Death takes people constantly by surprise, but I am just as I should like to be, able to understand everything, able to feel what is happening to me, not in pain, or unhappy. Oh, quick, quick, James! you shall hold my hand, and as long as I can speak I will tell you how it feels; like your friend. You remember Como and the boat and the floating away. Quick, quick, while I am happy, out of pain, clear in my head!’ Then her voice softened still more, and a piteous smile came upon her face. ‘Sorry only for you—O my James, my poor James! But you would rather send me away like this than see me perishing—perishing! Come, James!’

She loosed her hold upon him to let him rise, and he stumbled up to his feet like a man dazed, paused, looked at her; then throwing up his arms in a paroxysm of despair and misery, turned and fled from the room. ‘Ah!’ she gave a cry that he thought pursued him, echoing and echoing round his head as he rushed out of the house like a hunted man. But she had no power to pursue him, though her cry had. She sat up gazing after him, her arm stretched out, her head bent forward as when she was talking. Then her arm relaxed, her head drooped, a rush of womanish childish tears came to her eyes. Tears! at such a moment they made everything dim around her, but cleared away gradually like a mist, and once more the doomed woman saw clear. He was gone who should have been her loving executioner and saviour; but—her heart, which had sunk with the disappointment, gave another leap in her breast. He had left the remedy in her hands. The little medicine-chest stood open beside her on the table, within her reach. She did not pause to think, but put out her hand and selected one of the bottles firmly yet trembling, trembling only in her nerves, not in her courage. It required a little effort to pluck it out

of the closely-fitting case, and then she held death in her hands.

Just then a little rustle behind the curtain, a childish face peeping round the corner, disturbed her more than anything else in the world would have done. 'Mamma,' said Cara, 'what is that? What is that you are going to take? If papa would not give it you, can it be good for you? Oh, don't take it, mamma!'

Mrs. Beresford trembled so much that she could scarcely hold the bottle in her hand. 'It is something that will put my pain away,' she said, quite humbly. 'O Cara, my darling, I must take it; it will put away my pain!'

'Are you sure, quite sure?' said the child. 'Shall I ring for nurse, mamma, or shall I do it? My hand is quite steady. I can drop medicine as well as nurse can. Mamma, you are quite, quite sure it will do you good; then let me give it you.'

'No, no,' she said, with a low shriek and shudder, turning away from her. 'No, Cara, not for the world.'

'But I am very steady; and here is your glass, mamma.'

'God forbid!' she cried, 'not you, not you.' This last strange incident seemed to take from her the last excuse for delay, and hurried on her fate. She paused a moment, with her hands clasped close upon the little phial, and looked upward, her face inspired and shining with a wonderful solemnity. Then slowly she unclasped her fingers, sighed, and put it to her lips. It was not the right way to take medicine, poor little Cara thought, whose mind was all in a confusion, not knowing what to think. But the moment the deed was done, that solemn look which frightened Cara passed away from her mother's face. 'Ah!' she cried, fretfully, wiping her lips with her handkerchief, 'how nasty, how nasty it is! Give me a piece of sugar, a bit of biscuit, anything to put the taste away.'

Cara brought the biscuit, pleased to be of use. She picked up the bottle which had dropped out of her mother's hand, and put it back tidily in the case. She smoothed the disordered pillow. Mamma had been vexed because papa would not tell her something, would not let her know the truth, which was precisely what Cara herself objected to in him; but perhaps papa might have reason on his side too, for she was not strong enough to be agitated. And no doubt he would come back presently and make amends. In the meantime it pleased Cara to be her mother's sole attendant; she

put everything tidy with great care, drawing the coverlet straight, and smoothing the bed. The medicine chest was too heavy for her to carry back to its proper place, but at least she put it exactly level upon the table, with the other things cosily arranged round it. Her mother, following her movements with drowsy eyes, smiled softly upon her. 'Cara, come here,' she said; 'come and give me a kiss. You will be good, and take care of papa?'

'Yes,' said Cara, astonished. She was almost frightened by the kiss, so clinging and solemn, which her mother gave her, not on her cheek, but her mouth. Then Mrs. Beresford dropped back on the pillow, her eyes closing. Cara had finished her tidying. She thought the room looked more still than ever, and her patient more comfortable; and with a curious mixture of satisfaction and wonder she went back behind the curtain to nurse's big chair. Then her mother called her again; her eyes altogether closed this time, her voice like one half asleep.

'Cara, tell him I was not angry; tell him it is quite true — no pain, only floating, floating away.'

'What are you saying, mamma?'

'Floating, floating; he will know.' Then she half opened the drowsy eyes again, with a smile in them. 'Give me one kiss more, my Cara. I am going to sleep now.'

The child could not tell what made her heart beat so, and filled her with terror. She watched her mother for a moment, scarcely daring to draw her breath, and then rang the bell, with a confused desire to cry for help, though she could not have told why.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

JAMES BERESFORD was not brave. He was very kind and tender and good; but he had not courage to meet the darker emergencies of life. He felt as he rushed downstairs from his wife's presence that he had but postponed the evil day, and that many another dreadful argument on this subject, which was not within the range of arguing, lay before him. What could he say to her? He felt the abstract justice of her plea.

A hopeless, miserable, lingering, loathsome disease, which wore out even love itself, and made death a longed-for relief instead of a calamity. What could he say when she appealed to him to release her from that anguish of waiting, and hasten the deliverance which only could come in one way? He could not say that it would be wicked or a sin; all that he could say was, that he had not the courage to do it—had not the strength to put her away from him. Was it true, he asked himself, that he would rather watch out her lingering agonies than deprive himself of the sight of her, or consent to part with her a day sooner than he must? Was it himself he was thinking of alone, not her? Could he see her anguish and not dare to set her free? He knew that, in the case of another man, he would have counselled the harder self-sacrifice. But he, how could he do it? He rushed out of the house, through the afternoon sunshine, away to the first space he could find near, and struck across the open park, where there was no one to disturb him, avoiding all the pleasant walks and paths where people were. The open space and the silence subdued his excitement; and yet what could really bring him peace? He had no peace to look for—nothing but a renewed and ever-new painful struggle with her and with himself. Yes, even with himself. If she suffered greatly, he asked, with a shudder, how could he stand by and look on, knowing that he could deliver her? And would not she renew her prayers and cries to him for deliverance? God help him! It was not as if he had made an end of that mad prayer once and for ever by refusing it. It would come back—he knew it would come back—hour by hour and day by day.

Oh, how people talk (he thought) of such mysteries when the trouble is not theirs! He himself had argued the question often, in her hearing, even with her support. He had made it as clear as day to himself and to others. He had asked what but cowardice—miserable cowardice—would keep a man from fulfilling this last dread, yet tender service? Only love would dare it—but love supreme, what will that not do, to save, to succour, to help, to deliver? Love was not love which would shrink and think of self. So he had often said with indignant, impassioned expansion of the heart—and she had listened and echoed what he said. All this returned to him as he rushed across the dewy grass, wet with spring rains, and untrodden by any other foot, with London vague in mists

and muffled noises all round. Brave words—brave words! he remembered them, and his heart grew sick with self-pity. How did he know it was coming to *him*? How could he think that this case which was so plain, so clear, should one day be his own? God and all good spirits have pity upon him! He would have bidden you to do it, praised you with tears of sympathy for that tremendous proof of love; but himself? He shrank, shrank, contracted within himself; retreated, crouching and slinking, from the house. What a poor cur he was, not worthy the name of man! but he could not do it; it was beyond the measure of his powers.

When he turned to go home the afternoon light was waning. Small heart had he to go home. If he could have escaped anywhere he would have been tempted to do so; and yet he was on the rack till he returned to her. Oh, that Heaven would give her that sweet patience, that angelical calm in suffering, which some women have! Was it only religious women who had that calm? He asked himself this question with a piteous helplessness; for neither he nor she had been religious in the ordinary sense of the word. They had been *good* so far as they knew how—enjoying themselves, yet without unkindness, nay, with true friendliness, charity, brotherly-heartedness to their neighbours; but as for God, they had known little and thought less of that supreme vague Existence whom they accepted as a belief, without knowing Him as a person, or desiring to know. And now, perhaps, had their theory of life been different they might have been better prepared for this emergency. Was it so? He could not tell. Perhaps philosophy was enough with some strong natures, perhaps it was temperament. Who can tell how human creatures are moved; who touches the spring, and what the spring is, which makes one rebellious and another submissive, sweet as an angel? He had loved the movement, the variety, the indocility, the very caprice, of his wife, in all of which she was so much herself. Submission, resignedness, were not in that changeful, vivacious, wilful nature; but, oh, if only now the meekness of the more passive woman could somehow get transfused into her veins, the heavenly patience, the self courage that can meet anguish with a smile! There was Cherry, his faded old maiden sister—had it been she, it was in her to have drawn her cloak over the gnawing vulture, and borne her tortures without a sign of flinching. But even

the very idea of this comparison hurt him while it flashed through his mind. It was a slight to Annie to think that any one could bear this horrible fate more nobly than she. Poor Annie! by this time had she exhausted the first shock? Had she forgiven him? Was she asking for him? He turned, bewildered by all his dreary thoughts, and calmed a little by fatigue and silence, to go home once more.

It was getting dusk. As he passed the populous places of the park the hum of voices and pleasant sounds came over him dreamily like a waft of warmer air. He passed through that murmur of life and pleasure, and hurried along to the more silent stony streets among which his Square lay. As he approached he overtook Maxwell walking in the same direction, who looked at him with some suspicion. The two men accosted each other at the same moment.

'I wanted to see you. Come with me,' said Beresford; and——'What is the matter? Why did you send for me?' the doctor cried.

Then Maxwell explained that a hurried message had come for him more than an hour before, while he was out, and that he was on his way to the Square now.

'Has there been any—change?' he said. After this they sped along hurriedly with little conversation. There seemed something strange already about the house when they came in sight of it. The blinds were down in all the upper windows, but at the library appeared Cara's little white face looking eagerly out. She was looking out, but she did not see them, and an organ-man stood in front of the house grinding out the notes of the *Trovatore's* song 'Ah, che la morte,' upon his terrible instrument. Cara's eyes and attention seemed absorbed in this. James Beresford opened the door with his latch-key unobserved by any one, and went upstairs direct, followed by the doctor, to his wife's room.

How still it was! How dark! She was fond of light, and always had one of those tall moon lamps, which were her favourites; there was no lamp in the room, however, now; but only some twinkling candles, and through the side window a glimmer of chill blue sky. Nurse rose as her master opened the door. She gave a low cry at the sight of him. 'Oh, don't come here, sir, don't come here!' she cried.

'Is she angry, still angry?' said poor Beresford, his countenance falling.

'Oh, go away, sir; it was the doctor we wanted!' said the woman.

Meantime Maxwell had pushed forward to the bedside. He gave a cry of dismay and horror, surprise taking from him all self-control. 'When did this happen?' he said.

James Beresford pressed forward too, pushing aside the woman who tried to prevent him; and there he saw—what? Not his wife: a pale, lovely image, still as she never was in her life, far away, passive, solemn, neither caring for him nor any one; beyond all pain or fear of pain. 'My God!' he said. He did not seem even to wonder. Suddenly it became quite clear to him that for years he had known exactly how this would be.

Maxwell put the husband, who stood stupefied, out of his way; he called the weeping nurse, who, now that there was nothing to conceal, gave free outlet to her sorrow. 'Oh, don't ask me, sir, I can't tell you!' she said among her sobs. 'Miss Carry rung the bell and I came. And from that to this never a word from her, no more than moans and hard breathing. I sent for you, sir, and then for the nearest as I could get. He came, but there was nothing as could be done. If she took it herself or if it was give her, how can I tell? Miss Carry, poor child, she don't know what's happened; she's watching in the library for her papa. The medicine-box was on the table, sir, as you see. Oh, I don't hold with them medicine-boxes; they puts things into folk's heads! The other doctor said as it was laudanum; but if she took it, or if it was give her——'

Mr. Maxwell stopped the woman by a touch on the arm. Poor Beresford stood still there, supporting himself by the bed, gazing upon that which was no more his wife. His countenance was like that of one who had himself died; his mouth was open, the under lip dropped; the eyes strained and tearless. He heard, yet he did not hear what they were saying. Later it came back to his mind; at present he knew nothing of it. 'God help him!' said the doctor, turning away to the other end of the room. And there he heard the rest of the story. They left the two together who had been all in all to each other. Had he given her the quietus, he who loved her most, or had she taken it? This was what neither of them could tell. They stood whispering together while the husband, propping himself by the bed, looked at her. At *her*? It was not her. He stood and looked and

wondered, with a dull aching in him. No more—he could not go to her, call her by her name. A dreary, horrible sense that this still figure was some one else, a something new and unknown to him, another woman who was not his wife, came into his soul. He was frozen by the sudden shock; his blood turned into ice, his heart to stone. Annie! oh, heaven, no; not *that*; not the marble woman lying in her place! He was himself stone, but she was sculptured marble, a figure to put on a monument. Two hours of time—light, frivolous, flying hours—could not change flesh and blood into *that*; could not put life so far, and make it so impossible. He did not feel that he was bereaved, or a mourner, or that he had lost what he most loved; he felt only a stone, looking at stone, with a dull ache in him, and a dull consternation, nothing more. When Maxwell came and took him by the arm he obeyed stupidly, and went with his friend, not moving with any will of his own, but only because the other moved him; making no ‘scene’ or terrible demonstrations of misery. Maxwell led him downstairs holding him by the arm, as if he had been made of wood, and took him to the library, and thrust him into a chair, still in the same passive state. It was quite dark there, and Cara, roused from her partial trance of watching at the window, stumbled down from her chair at the sight of them, with a cry of alarm, yet relief, for the lamps outside had beguiled the child, and kept her from perceiving how dark it had grown till she turned round. No one had thought of bringing in the lamp, of lighting the candles, or any of the common offices of life in that house where Death had so suddenly set up his seat. The doctor rang the bell and ordered lights and wine. He began to fear for James: his own mind was agitated with doubts, and a mingled severity and sympathy. He felt that whatever had happened he must find it out; but, whatever had happened, how could he do less than feel the sentiment of a brother for his friend? He did not take much notice of the child, but stooped and kissed her, being the friend of the house, and bade her go to her nurse in a softened tender tone. But he scarcely remarked that Cara did not go. Poor child, who had lost her mother! but his pity for her was of a secondary kind. It was the man whom he had to think of—who had done it, perhaps—who, perhaps, was his wife’s innocent murderer—yet whom, nevertheless, this good man felt his heart yearn and melt over

When the frightened servant came in, with red eyes, bringing the wine, Maxwell poured out some for the chief sufferer, who sat motionless where he had placed him, saying nothing. It was necessary to rouse him one way or other from this stupefaction of pain.

'Beresford,' he said curtly, 'listen to me; we must understand each other. It is you who have done this? Be frank with me—be open. It is either you or she herself. I have never met with such a case before; but I am not the man to be hard upon you. Beresford! James! think, my dear fellow, think; we were boys together; you can't suppose I'll be hard on you.'

'She asked me—she begged of me,' said Beresford, slowly. 'Maxwell, you are clever, you can do wonders.'

'I can't bring those back that have gone—*there*,' said the doctor, a sudden spasm coming in his throat. 'Don't speak of the impossible. Clever—God knows! miserable bunglers, that is what we are, knowing nothing. James! I won't blame you; I would have done it myself in your place. Speak out; you need not have any reserves from me.'

'It isn't that. Maxwell, look here; they've spirited my wife away, and put *that* in her place.'

'God! he's going mad,' said the doctor, feeling his own head buzz and swim.

'No,' was the answer, with a sigh. 'No, I almost wish I could. I tell you it is not her. You saw it as well as I. That my wife? Maxwell——'

'It is all that remains of her,' said the doctor, sternly. 'Mind what I say; I must know; no more of this raving. Did you do it? Of course she asked you, poor soul!' (Here the doctor's voice wavered as if a gust of wind had blown it about.) 'She never could endure the thought of pain; she asked you, it was natural: and you gave her—opium?'

'Nothing. I dared not,' he said, with a shiver. 'I had not the courage. I let her plead; but I had not the courage. What? put her away from me, willingly? how could I do it? Yes; if she had been in a paroxysm; if I had seen her in agony; but she was calm, not suffering, and she asked me to do it in cold blood?'

'What then?' The doctor spoke sternly, keeping the tone of authority to which in his stupefied state poor Beresford appeared to respond. Cara from a corner looked on with wide-open eyes, listening to everything.

‘Nothing more,’ he said, still sighing heavily. ‘It was more than I could bear. I rushed away. I went out to calm myself—to try and think; and I met you, Maxwell; and now——’

He lifted his hands with a shuddering gesture. ‘That is all—that is all! and this desolate place is my—home; and *that* is—Annie! No, no! Maxwell, some of your doctors—your cruel doctors—have taken her away to try their experiments. Oh, say it is so, and I’ll thank you on my knees!’

‘Be quiet, Beresford! Try and be a man. Don’t you see what I have got to do? If it was not you it was herself. I don’t blame her, poor soul, poor soul! the thought of all she had to go through made her mad. Be silent, man, I tell you! We must not have her branded with the name of suicide, James,’ cried the doctor, fairly sobbing. ‘Poor girl, poor girl! it is not much wonder if she was afraid; but we must not let them say ill of her now she is gone. I remember her before you married her, a lovely creature; and there she is, lying—but they must not speak ill of her. I’ll say it was —— Yes, if it’s a lie I can’t help that—my conscience will bear it—there must not be talk, and an inquest. Yes, that’s what I’ll say.’

‘An inquest!’ said the wretched husband, waking up from his stupor with a great cry.

‘I’ll take it upon myself,’ said Maxwell, going to the writing-table. Then he saw Cara leaning out of her chair towards them with great strained wide-open eyes.

‘Cara! have you heard all we were saying?’

‘I don’t understand, I don’t understand!’ said the child with sudden sobs. ‘What have you done to my mamma?’

The door of the library opened softly, and they all started as if at the approach of a new calamity.

‘If you please, sir,’ said John, addressing Maxwell with natural recognition of the only source of authority, ‘I came to see if you wouldn’t have some dinner—and master——’

With a moan, Beresford hid his face in his hands. Dinner must be, whosoever lives or dies—if the world were breaking up—if hope and love had failed for ever. John stood for a moment against the more powerful light of the gas in the hall, for his answer, and then, not getting any, he had the grace to steal quietly away.

But this wonderful intrusion of the outer ordinary life disturbed the melancholy assembly. It roused Beresford to a

sense of what had befallen him. He got up and began to pace up and down the long room, and Cara's sobs broke the silence, and Maxwell at the table, with a spasm in his throat, compiled the certificate of the death. In what medical form he put it I cannot tell; but he strained his conscience and said something which would pass, which nobody could contradict; was not that enough? 'I hope I may never do anything more wicked,' he said, muttering to himself. The nurse came to call the child, which was the first thing that had seemed natural to Cara in the whole miserable day's proceedings. She did not resist the command to go to bed, as they had all resisted the invitation to dine. She got up quickly when nurse called her, glad of something she was used to.

'It's the only place as we're all fit for,' said nurse, with a sigh of weariness; 'your poor papa, Miss Carry, as well as the rest.' Then she turned to the gentlemen with a touch of natural oratory. 'What is the use of talking,' she said; 'I'm one as has loved her since first she drew breath. She was my child, she was; and look you here, I'm glad—her old nurse is glad. I'll not cry nor make no moan for her,' said nurse, the tears running down her cheeks. 'I'd have give her that dose myself if the darling had asked me; I would, and never have trembled. I'd have done it and stood up bold and told you I done it, and I don't blame her. She's seen what it was, and so have I.'

'Nurse, you are a good woman,' said the doctor, coming hastily forward and grasping her hand. 'Nurse, hold your tongue, and don't say a word. Don't let those idiots talk downstairs. I'm ready to give them the reason of it whoever asks. I did not know it would come on so quickly when I left to-day; but I know what it is that has carried her off. It was to be expected, if we hadn't all been a parcel of fools.'

Nurse looked him anxiously in the face. 'Then it wasn't—it wasn't?—Ah!' she added, drawing a long breath, 'I think I understand.'

'Now, hold your tongue,' he cried, curtly, 'and stop the others. You are a sensible woman. My poor little Cara, good-night.'

'Don't speak to him,' nurse whispered, drawing the child away. 'Leave your poor papa alone, darling. God help him, he can't say nothing to you to-night. Here's Sarah coming to put you to bed, and glad I'd be to be there too: it's the only place as we're fit for now.'

Sarah, who was waiting outside, had red eyes overflowing with tears. She hugged the little girl and kissed her, bursting out into fits of subdued crying. But Cara's own sobs were stilled and over. Her head ached with bewildering pain; her mind was full of confused bewildering thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONSOLATION.

‘THIS is indeed an affliction, dear Miss Beresford. We came up directly we heard of it; I would not let a moment pass. Oh, how little we know! We were thinking of your poor niece as having returned from her foreign tour; as being about to enter upon the brilliant society of the season. I don't know when I have received such a shock; and my poor Maria, her feelings were almost beyond control; but she would not stay away.’

‘I thought she would come,’ said Miss Charity. ‘Maria always likes to get news from the fountain-head, and to see how people are bearing their troubles. Yes, my dear, I am bearing mine very well, as you see. Poor Annie! she was only my niece by marriage after all. At my age one sees even one's own nieces, women with families, die without great trouble. It may sound hard, but it's true. When a woman is married, and has her own children about her, you can't but feel that she's less to you. It's dreadful for *them*; but, so far as you are concerned, you lost her long ago.’

‘Oh, dear Miss Beresford, you like to pretend you are calm, to hide how soft-hearted you are! But we know you better than that. I myself, though I knew (comparatively) so little of poor Mrs. James——’

‘And I thought you did not like each other, so it is all the more kind of you to cry. Cherry will cry too as much as you please, and be thankful for your sympathy. Have you had a pleasant walk? I think the primroses are thicker than ever this spring. We have been sending up basketsful. She was fond of them——’ Here the old lady faltered for a moment. This was the kind of allusion that melted her, not straightforward talk. She was in profound black, a great deal

more crape than the dressmaker thought at all necessary, but Miss Charity had her own views on these subjects. 'Put double upon me, and take it off the child,' she had said, to the wonder of the tradespeople, who felt that the mourning for a niece by marriage was a very different thing from that which was required for a mother. Mrs. Burchell respected her greatly for her crape. She knew the value of it, and the unthriftiness, and felt that this was indeed showing respect.

'We heard it was very sudden at last,' said the Rector, 'that nobody had the least idea—it was a very lingering disorder that she was supposed to have? So we heard, at least. Do you happen to know how the doctors accounted for its suddenness at last? There is something very dreadful to the imagination in so sudden a death.'

'I wish I could think I should have as quick an end,' said Miss Charity; 'but we Beresfords are strong, and die hard. We can't shake off life like that. We have to get rid of it by inches.'

'My dear lady,' said the Rector, 'I don't mean to say that I would put any trust in death-bed repentances; but surely it is a privilege to have that time left to us for solemn thought, for making sure that we are in the right way.'

'I never think much when I am ill, my dear Rector; I can't. I think why the flies buzz so, and I think if I was Martha it would make me unhappy to have such a red nose; and if you came to me, instead of listening to what you said, I should be thinking all the time that your white tie was undone' (here the Rector furtively and nervously glanced down, and instinctively put up his hand to feel if the remark was true) 'or your coat rusty at the elbows. I say these things at a hazard, not that I ever remarked them,' she added, laughing. 'You are tidiness itself.'

The Rector was put out by these chance possibilities of criticism, and could not but feel that Miss Charity's quick eyes must have seen him with his white tie untidy, loosely unfastened, under his beard. He had grown a beard, like so many clergymen, and it was not an improvement. Instead of looking clean, as he once did, he looked black and coarse, a mixture of sea-captain and divine. He kept putting up his hand stealthily all the time he remained, and inviting his wife with nervous glances, to let him know if all was right. Unfortunately he could not see it under the forest of black beard.

‘We heard,’ said his wife, coming to his relief, ‘that there was something about an opiate—an over-dose, something of that sort—that poor Mrs. James had taken it without measuring it, or—you know how everything is exaggerated. I was quite afraid, and so glad to see the death in the paper without any inquest or formalities of that kind, which must be so painful. Was there really nothing in the story of the opiate. It is so strange how things get about.’

‘I don’t think it at all strange, Maria. The servants call in a strange doctor, in their fright, who does not know anything about her case or temperament. He hears that she has to take some calming drops to relieve her pain, and of course he jumps in his ignorance to the idea of an overdose. It is the fashionable thing now-a-days. It is what they all say——’

‘And there was *no* truth in it?’

‘None whatever,’ said Miss Charity, who, safest of all advocates, implicitly believed what she was saying, not knowing that any doubt had ever existed on the subject. She sat facing them in her new mourning, so freshly, crisply black. Miss Charity knew of no mystery even, and her calm certainty had all the genuine force of truth.

The Rector and his wife looked at each other. ‘It shows that one should not believe the tenth part of what one hears,’ he said. ‘I was told confidently that poor Mrs. James Beresford held strange ideas about some things.’

‘That you may be quite sure of, Rector. I never knew any one yet worth their salt who did not hold odd ideas about something——’

‘Not about fundamentals, my dear lady. I am not strait-laced; but there are some matters—on some things, I am sure, none of us would like to give an uncertain sound. Life, for example—human life, is too sacred to be trifled with; but there is a set of speculatists, of false philosophers—I don’t know what to call them—sceptics, infidels they generally are, and at the same time radicals, republicans——’

‘Ah, politics? I dare say poor Annie was odd in politics. What did it matter? they were not political people. If James had been in Parliament, indeed, as I should like to have seen him—but unfortunately he was a man of fine tastes; that is fatal. A man of fine tastes, who is fond of travelling, and collecting, and rapt up in his wife, will never become a public man; and I should like to have seen James in Parlia-

ment. Strange ideas! oh, yes, queer to the last degree. If there is anything worse than republicanism (is there?) I should think poor Annie went in for that.'

'That is bad enough, but it is not exactly what I meant,' said the Rector; and then he rose up with an air of the deepest conventional respect. 'My dear, here is your kind friend, Miss Cherry,' he said.

Mrs. Burchell sprang up at the intimation, and rushed forward with open arms. She had put on a black merino dress instead of her usual silk, and a black shawl, to mark her sense of the calamity—and swallowed up poor slim Miss Cherry in the entanglements of that embrace, with solemn fervour. Cherry had not much sense of humour, and she was too good to pass any judgment upon the sudden warmth of affection thus exhibited; but it was a little confusing and suffocating to find herself without any warning engulfed in Mrs. Burchell's old merino and the folds of her shawl.

'Oh, my dear, dear Cherry, if I could but tell you how I feel for you! How little did we think when we last met——'

'You are very kind,' said Miss Cherry, drawing herself forth somewhat limp and crushed from this embrace. 'I am sure you are very kind.' Her lips quivered and the tears came to her eyes; but she was not so overwhelmed as her consoler, who had begun to sob. 'It is my poor brother I think of,' said Miss Cherry. 'It is little to us in comparison with what it is to him. I think of him most; more than of poor Annie, who is safe out of all trouble.'

'We must hope so, at least,' said the Rector, shaking his head; and his wife stopped sobbing, and interchanged a glance with him, which was full of meaning.

'Poor Mrs. James! It was so sudden. I fear there was no time for preparation—no time even for thought?'

'Men soon get the better of these things,' said Miss Charity, 'and the more they feel it at the time the more easily they are cured. Cherry there will think of her longer than her husband will. I don't mean to say your grief's so great, my dear, but it will last.'

'Oh, aunt, you do James injustice! He thought of nothing but Annie. The light of his eyes is gone, and the comfort of his house, and all he cares for in life.'

Here poor Miss Cherry, moved by her own eloquence, began to cry, picturing to herself this dismal future. Nothing at Sunninghill was changed: the room was as full of primroses as the woods were; great baskets of them mingled with blue violets filled every corner; the sunshine came in unclouded; the whole place was bright. It struck the tender-hearted woman with sudden compunction: 'We are not touched,' she said; 'we have everything just the same as ever, as bright; but my poor James, in that house by himself; and the child! Oh, Aunt Charity, when I think of him, I feel as if my heart would break.'

Miss Charity took up her work and began to knit furiously. 'He will get over it,' she said, 'in time. It will be dreadful work at first; but he will get over it. He has plenty of friends, both men and women. Don't upset me with your talk; he will get over it—men always do.'

'And let us hope it will lead him to think more seriously,' said Mrs. Burchell. 'Oh, I am sure if you thought my dear husband could be of any use—we all know he has not been what we may call serious, and oh, dear Miss Beresford, would not this affliction be a cheap price to pay for it, if it brought him to a better state of mind?'

'His wife's life? It would be a high price for any advantage that would come to him, I think. Dry your eyes, Cherry, and go and put on your bonnet. This is Mr. Maxwell's day, and you had better go back to town with him.'

'Was it Mr. Maxwell who attended poor Mrs. James? I hope he is considered a clever man.'

'How oddly you good people speak! Do you want to insinuate that he is not a clever man? He takes charge of my health, you know, and he has kept me going long enough. Eh! yes, I am irritable, I suppose; we are all put out. You good quiet folks, with all your children about, nothing happening to you——'

'Indeed, Miss Beresford, you do us great injustice,' said Mrs. Burchell, stung, as was natural, by such an assertion, while the Rector slowly shook his head. 'We do not complain; but perhaps if we were to tell all, as some people do. Nothing happening to us!—ah, how little you know!'

'Well, well, let us say you have a great many troubles; you can feel then for other people. Ah, here is Mr. Maxwell. Don't talk of me now; don't think of me, my good man. I

am as well—as well—a great deal better than a poor useless woman of nearly threescore and ten has any right to be when the young are taken. How is James?’

The doctor, who had come in by the open window with a familiarity which made the Rector and his wife look at each other, sat down by the old lady's side and began to talk to her. Miss Cherry had gone to put on her bonnet, and by-and-by Mr. and Mrs. Burchell rose to take their leave.

‘I am so glad to hear that, sad as it was, it was a natural death, and one that you expected,’ said the Rector, taking Maxwell aside for a moment.

The doctor stared at him, with somewhat fiery eyes. ‘A natural death? Mrs. Beresford's? What did you expect it to be?’

‘Oh, my dear sir, I don't mean anything! We had heard very different accounts—so many things are said——’

‘You should put a stop to them, then,’ said the other, who was not without temper; and he and Miss Charity paused in their sadder talk, as the visitors disappeared, to interchange some remarks about them which were not complimentary.

‘What they can mean by making up such wicked lies, and putting a slur on her memory, poor child!’ said the old lady with a sudden gush of hot tears.

The doctor said something very hotly about ‘meddlesome parsons,’ and hastily plunged again into descriptions of poor James. The other was not a subject on which he could linger. ‘I never saw a man so broken-hearted; they were always together; he misses her morning, noon, and night. Cherry must come to him; she must come at once,’ he said, forgetting how long it was since he had spoken of Cherry before by her Christian name. But Miss Charity noticed it with the keen spectator instinct of her age, and ruminated in an undercurrent of thought even while she thought of ‘poor James,’ whether Maxwell's faith in Cherry ‘meant anything,’ or if new combinations of life might be involved in the sequences of that death scene.

The same thought was in the minds of the clerical pair as they went down the hill. ‘Will *that* come to anything?’ they said to each other.

‘It is a nice little property,’ said the Rector, ‘and I suppose she will have everything.’

‘But if I was Cherry,’ said Mrs. Burchell, ‘I should not

like to be thrown at his head in that very open way. Going with him to town! It is as good as offering her to him.'

'She is no longer young, my dear,' said the Rector, 'and people now-a-days have not your delicacy.'

'Oh, I have no patience with their nonsense!' she cried; 'and their friendships, forsooth—as if men and women could ever be friends!'

And it is possible that in other circumstances Miss Cherry's tranquil soul might have owned a flutter at thought of the escort which she accepted so quietly to-day; but she was absorbed with thoughts of her brother and of the possible use she might be, which was sweet to her, notwithstanding her grief. Miss Charity shook her head doubtfully. 'It is not Cherry that will help him,' she said, 'but the child will be the better of a woman in the house.'

Really that was what Mr. Maxwell wanted, a woman in the house; something to speak to, something to refer everything to; something to blame even, if things were not all right. The funeral was over, and all that dismal business which appals yet gives a temporary occupation and support to the sorrowful. And now the blank of common life had recommenced.

'Perhaps she will not help him much; but she will be there,' said the doctor. He was glad for himself that a soft-voiced, soft-eyed, pitying creature should be there. There was help in the mere fact, whatever she might say or do.

Cara had been living a strange life through these melancholy days. She had not known, poor child, the full significance of that scene by her mother's bedside, of which she had been a witness. She did not fully understand even now: but glimmers of horrible intelligence had come to her during that interview in the library, and the things she had heard afterwards from the servants had enlightened her still more. She heard the whispers that circulated among them, terrified whispers, said half under their breath. That she had done it herself—that she knew, poor dear, what she was doing—that if anything had been known, there would have been an inquest, and things would have come out. This was what Cara heard breathing about in half whispers, and which filled her with strange panic, lest her secret should escapé her. She knew the secret, and she only. Nobody had questioned her, but the child's impulse to tell had bound her very soul for days

after. She had resisted it, though she had felt guilty and miserable to know something which no one else knew; but she had kept her secret. 'Don't let us brand her with the name of suicide.' These words seemed to ring in her ears night and day. She repeated them over and over to herself. 'Don't let us brand her with the name of suicide.'

'No, no,' poor Cara said to herself, trembling; 'no, no: ' though this premature and horrible secret weighed down her heart like a visible burden. Oh, if she could but have told it to nurse, or to Aunt Cherry! but she must not, not even to papa. When her aunt arrived, it was mingled torture and relief to the poor child. She clung round her with sobbing, longing so to tell; but even to cling and to sob was consolatory, and Aunt Cherry wanted no explanation of that unusual depth of childish distress. 'Cara was not like other children,' she said to herself. She had feelings which were deeper and more tender. She was 'sensitive,' she was 'nervous.' She was more loving than the ordinary children, who cry one moment and forget the next. And kind Cherry, though her own grief was of the milder, secondary kind, as was natural, had always tears of sympathy to give for the grief of others. She took the little girl almost entirely into her own care, and would talk to her for hours together; about being 'good,' about subduing all her little irritabilities, in order to please mamma, who was in heaven, and would be grieved in her happiness to think that her child was not 'good.' Cara was greatly awed and subdued by this talk. It hushed her, yet set her wondering; and those conversations were sometimes very strange ones, which went on between the two in their melancholy and silent hours.

'Does everybody go to heaven who dies?' said Cara, with awe-stricken looks.

Miss Cherry trembled a little, having some fear of false doctrine before her eyes. 'Everybody, I hope, who loves God. There are bad people, Cara; but we don't know them, you and I.'

'Who love God? but I never think of God, Aunt Cherry. At least, I do now; I wonder. But if they did not do that, would they still go to heaven all the same?'

'God loves us, dear,' said Cherry, with the tears in her soft eyes. 'Fathers and mothers love their children, whether their children love them or not. That is all we know.'

'Whatever they do? if they even laugh, and go wrong? Yes,' said Cara, very thoughtfully, 'I suppose papa would not send me away, out into the dark, if I did ever so wrong.'

'I am sure he would not; but you must not think of such things, dear; they are too difficult for you. When you are older, you will understand better,' Cherry said, faltering, and with something in her heart which contradicted her; for did not the child 'understand' better than she?

Then Cara started another difficulty, quite as appalling; facing it with innocent confidence, yet wonder: 'What sort of a place,' she asked, softly, looking up with her blue eyes full of serious faith and awe, 'is heaven?'

'Oh, my dear,' said Miss Cherry, 'you ask me what I would give all I have in the world to know! There are so many whom I love there.'

'But what do you *think*? Often when one doesn't know, one has an *idea*. I don't know Italy or India; but I imagine something. Aunt Cherry, tell me what you think.'

'Oh, Cara, my darling, I don't know what it is *like*! I know there is no trouble or pain in it; and that God is not so far off as here. No, He is not far off here; but we can't see Him; and we are such poor dull creatures. And I *think*, Cara, I *think* that our Lord must be always about there. That people may go and stand on the roadside and see Him pass, and talk to Him, and be satisfied about everything.'

'How—be satisfied about everything?'

'Oh, child! I should not want anything more. He sees both sides, my darling, both here and there, and understands. I am sure they must be able to speak to Him, and go to Him, whenever they will——'

This thought brought great tears, a suffusion of utter wistfulness yet heart-content, to Cherry's eyes. Little Cara did not know very well what was meant by such words. She did not understand this conception of the great Creator as a better taught child might have done. But she said to herself, all secretly: 'If there is One like *that*, whether it is in heaven or earth, I might tell Him, and it would be no harm.'

While Miss Cherry dried her eyes, her heart lightened by that overflowing. Perhaps, though they had not seen Him, He had passed that way, and heard the babble—what was it more?—between the woman and the child.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HILL.

AFTER this a long interval passed, which it is needless to describe in detail. Five years is a long time in a life; how much it does! Makes ties and breaks them, gives life and withdraws it, finds you happy and leaves you miserable, builds you up or plucks you down; and at the same time how little it does! Buffets you, caresses you, plays at shuttlecock with you; yet leaves you the same man or woman, unchanged. Most of this time James Beresford had spent in absences, now here, now there; not travels according to the old happy sense, though in a real and matter-of-fact sense they were more travels than those he had made so happily in the honeymooning days. But he did not like to use the word. He called his long voyages absences, nothing more. And they were of a very different kind from those expeditions of old. He avoided the Continent as if pestilence had been there, and would not even cross it to get the mail at Brindisi, but went all the way round from Southampton when he went to the East. He went up the Nile, with a scientific party, observing some phenomena or other. He went to America in the same way. He was not a very good sailor, but he made up his mind to that as the best way of fighting through those lonely years. Once he went as far north as any but real Arctic explorers, with their souls in it, had ever done. Once he tracked the possible path of Russia across the wildest border wastes to the Indian frontier. He went everywhere languidly but persistently, seldom roused, but never discouraged. A man may be very brave outside, though he is not brave within; and weakness is linked to strength in ways beyond our guessing. He went into such wilds once, that they gave him an 'ovation' at the Geographical Society's meeting, not because of any information he had brought them, or anything he had done, but because he had been so far off, where so few people had ever been. And periodically he came back to the Square; he would not leave that familiar house. His wife's drawing-room was kept just as she had liked it, though no one entered the room: the cook and John the butler, who had married, having the charge of everything. And when

Mr. Beresford came back to England, he went home, living downstairs generally, with one of his travelling companions to bear him company. Maxwell and he had dropped apart. They were still by way of being fast friends, and doubtless, had one wanted the other, would still have proved so—last resource of friendship, in which the severed may still hope. But, as nothing happened to either, their relations waxed cold and distant. The doctor had never got clear of the suspicion which had risen in his mind at Mrs. Beresford's death. It is true that had James Beresford given the poor lady that 'strong sweet dose' she once had asked for, Maxwell would have forgiven his friend with all his heart. I do not know, in such a strange case, what the doctor could have done; probably exactly as he did afterwards do, invent a death-certificate which might be accepted as possible, though it was not in accordance with the facts. But, anyhow, he would have taken up warmly, and stood by his friend to his last gasp. This being the case, it is impossible to tell on what principle it was that Maxwell half hated Beresford, having a lurking suspicion that he had done it—a suspicion contradicted by his own statement and by several of the facts. But this was the case. The man who would have helped his wife boldly, heart-brokenly, to escape from living agony, was one thing; but he who would give her a fatal draught, or connive at her getting it, and then veil himself so that no one should know, was different. So Mr. Maxwell thought. The inconsistency might be absurd; but it was so. They positively dropped out of acquaintance. The men who visited James Beresford when he was at home, were men with tags to their names, mystic initials, F.G.S.'s, F.R.S.'s, F.S.A.'s, and others of that class. And Maxwell, who was his oldest friend, dropped off. He said to himself that if Beresford ever wanted him badly, he would find his friendship surviving. But Beresford did not want Maxwell nor Maxwell Beresford; and thus they were severed for a suspicion which would not have severed them had it been a reality, or so at least Maxwell thought. The doctor still went down once a week regularly to visit Miss Charity, and so kept up his knowledge of the family; but 'nothing came' of the old fancy that had been supposed to exist between him and Cherry. They all hardened down unconsciously, these middle-aged folk, in their various ways. The doctor became a little rougher, a little

redder, a trifle more weather-beaten ; and Miss Cherry grew imperceptibly more faded, more slim, more prim. As for Miss Charity, being now over seventy, she was younger than ever ; her unwrinkled cheeks smoother, her blue eyes as blue, her step almost more alert, her garden more full of roses. 'After seventy,' she tersely said, 'one gets a new lease.' And Mrs. Burchell, at the Rectory, was a little stouter, and her husband a little more burly, and both of them more critical. Fifty is perhaps a less amiable age than three-score and ten. I am not sure that it is not the least amiable age of all ; the one at which nature begins to resent the fact of growing old. Of all the elder generation, James Beresford was the one to whom it made least change, notwithstanding that he was the only one who had 'come through' any considerable struggle. He was still speculative, still fond of philosophical talk, still slow to carry out to logical conclusions any of the somewhat daring theories which he loved to play with. He was as little affected as ever by what he believed and what he did not believe.

As for Cara, however, these five years had made a great difference to her ; they had widened the skies over her head and the earth under her feet. Whereas she had been but twelve, a child, groping and often in the dark, now she was seventeen, and every new day that rose was a new wonder to her. Darkness had fled away, and the firmament all around her quivered and trembled with light ; night but pretended to be, as in summer, when twilight meets twilight, and makes the moment of so-called midnight and darkness the merriest and sweetest of jests. Everything was bright around her feet, and before her in that flowery path which led through tracts of sunshine. She was no more afraid of life than the flowers are. Round about her the elders, who were her guides, and ought to have been her examples, were not, she might have perceived, had she paused to think, exuberantly happy. They had no blessedness to boast of, nor any exemption from common ills ; but it no more occurred to Cara to think that she, *she* could ever be like her good Aunt Cherry, or Mrs. Burchell, than that she could be turned into a blue bird, like the prince in the fairy tale. The one transformation would have been less wonderful than the other. She had lived chiefly at Sunninghill during her father's absence, and it was a favourite theory with the young Burchells, all but two (there were ten of them), that she would progress in

time to be the Miss Cherry, and then the Miss Charity, of that maiden house. A fate was upon it, they said. It was always to be in the hands of a Miss Beresford, an old-maidish Charity, to be transmitted to another Charity after her. This was one of the favourite jokes of the rectorial household, warmly maintained except by two, *i.e.* Agnes, the eldest, a young woman full of aspirations; and Roger, the second boy, who had aspirations too, or rather who had one aspiration, of which Cara was the object. She would not die Charity Beresford if he could help it; but this was a secret design of which nobody knew. Cara's presence, it may be supposed, had made a great deal of difference at Sunninghill. It had introduced a governess and a great many lessons; and it had introduced juvenile parties and an amount of fun unparalleled before in the neighbourhood. Not that she was a very merry child, though she was full of visionary happiness; but when she was there, there too was drawn everything the two other elder Charity Beresfords could think of as delightful. The amusements of the princesses down in St. George's were infinitely less considered. To be sure there were many of them, and Cara was but one. She would have been quite happy enough in the garden, among the roses; but because this was the case she had every 'distraction' that love could think of, and all the young people in the neighbourhood had reason to rejoice that Cara Beresford had come to live with her aunts at Sunninghill.

However, these delights came to an end when Mr. Beresford came home at length 'to settle.' To say with what secret dismay, though external pleasure, this news was received at 'the Hill' would require a volume. The hearts of the ladies there sank into their shoes. They did not dare to say anything but that they were delighted.

'Of course I am to be congratulated,' Miss Charity said, with a countenance that seemed to be cut out of stone. 'To see James settle down to his life again is the greatest desire I can have. What good was he to any one, wandering like that over the face of the earth? We might all have been dead and buried before we could have called him back.'

'Of course we are *delighted*,' said Miss Cherry, with a quaver in her voice. 'He is my only brother. People get separated when they come to our time of life, but James and I have always been one in heart. I am more glad than words

can say.' And then she cried. But she was not a strong-minded or consistent person, and her little paradoxes surprised nobody. Miss Charity herself, however, who was not given to tears, made her blue eyes more muddy that first evening after the news came, than all her seventy years had made them. 'What is the child to do?' she asked abruptly when they were alone; 'of an age to be "out," and without a chaperon, or any sense in his head to teach him that such a thing is wanted?'

'You would not like him to marry again?' said Miss Cherry, blowing her agitated nose.

'I'd like him to have some sense, or sensible notions in his head, whatever he does. What is to become of the child?'

Alas! I fear it was, 'What is to become of us without her?' that filled their minds most.

It was autumn; the end of the season at which the Hill was most beautiful. It had its loveliness too in winter, when the wonderful branching of the trees—all that symmetry of line and network which summer hides with loving decorations—was made visible against the broader background of the skies, which gained infinitude from the dropping of those evanescent clouds of foliage. But the common mind rejected the idea of the Hill in winter as that place of bliss which it was acknowledged to be during the warmer half of the year. In autumn, however, the 'mists and mellow fruitfulness' of the great plain, the tints of fervid colour which came to the trees, the soft hazy distances and half-mournful brightness of the waning season, gave the place a special beauty. There were still abundant flowers fringing the lawn; blazing red salvias, geraniums, all the warm-hued plants that reach the 'fall;' big hollyhocks flaunting behind backs, and languishing dahlias. Some late roses lingered still; the air was sweet with the faint soft perfume of mignonette; petunias, just on the point of toppling over into decay, made a flutter of white and lilac against the walls, and here and there a bunch of belated honeysuckle, or cluster of jessamine stars out of date, threw themselves forth upon the trellis. It was on the sweetest mellow autumnal day, warm as July, yet misty as October, that the Miss Beresfords had their last garden-party for Cara. All their parties were for Cara; but this was especially hers, her friends far and near coming to take leave of her, as her life at the Hill terminated.

'She goes just at the proper moment,' Miss Charity said, sitting out on the lawn in her white crape shawl, receiving her visitors, with St. George's and all the plain beyond shining through the autumn branches like a picture laid at her feet. 'She takes the full good of us to the last, and when winter comes, which lays us bare, she will be off with the other birds. She lasts just a little longer than the swallows,' said the old lady with a laugh.

'But you can't wonder, dear Mrs. Beresford, that she should wish to go to her father. What can come up to a father?' said Mrs. Burchell, meaning, it is to be supposed, to smooth over the wound.

Miss Charity lifted her big green fan ominously in her hand. It was closed, and it might have inflicted no slight blow; and, of all things in the world, it would have pleased the old lady most to bring it down smartly upon that fat hand, stuffed desperately into a tight purple glove, and very moist and discoloured by the confinement, which rested on the admirable clergywoman's knee.

Meanwhile Roger Burchell, who was bold, and did not miss his chances, had got Cara away from the croquet players and the talk, on pretence of showing her something. 'I am coming to see you in town,' he said. 'It is as easy to go there as to come here, and I shan't care for coming here when you are gone. So you need not say good-bye to me.'

'Very well,' said Cara, laughing; 'is that all? I don't mean to say good-bye to any one. I am not going for good. Of course I shall come back.'

'You will never come back just the same,' said Roger; 'but mind what I tell you. I mean to come to town. I have an aunt at Notting Hill. When I get leave from the college I shall go there. The old lady will be pleased; and so you shall see me every Sunday, just as you do now.'

'Every Sunday!' said Cara, slightly surprised. 'I don't mind, Roger; it can't matter to me; but I don't think they will like it here.'

'They will like it if you do,' said the enterprising youth. He was twenty, and soon about to enter on his profession, which was that of an engineer. He was not deeply concerned as to what his parents might feel; but at the same time he was perfectly confident of their appreciation of Cara as an excellent match, should that luck be his. This is not intended

to mean that Roger thought of Cara as a good match. He had, on the contrary, an honest boyish love for her, quite true and genuine, if not of the highest kind. She was the prettiest girl he knew, and the sweetest. She was clever too in her way, though that was not his way. She was the sort of girl to be proud of, wherever you might go with her; and, in short, Roger was so fond of Cara, that but for that brilliant idea of his, of passing his Sundays with his aunt at Notting Hill instead of at home, her departure would have clouded heaven and earth for him. As it was, he felt the new was rather an improvement on the old; it would throw him into closer contact with the object of his love. Cara took the arrangement generally with great composure. She was glad enough to think of seeing some one on the dull Sundays; and somehow the Sundays used to be duller in the Square, where nobody minded them, than at the Hill, where they were kept in the most orthodox way. Thus she had no objection to Roger's visits; but the prospect did not excite her. 'I suppose you are soon going away somewhere?' she said, with great calm. 'Where are you going? to India? You cannot come from India to your aunt at Notting Hill.'

'But I shall not go—not as long as I can help it—not till——'

Here Roger looked at her with eager eyes. He was not handsome; he was stoutly built, like his father, with puffy cheeks and premature black whiskers. But his eyes at the present moment were full of fire. 'Not till——' How much he meant by that broken phrase! and to Cara it meant just nothing at all. She did not even look at him, to meet his eyes, which were so full of ardour. But she was not disinclined to loiter along this walk instead of joining the crowd. She was thinking her own thoughts, not his.

'I wonder if papa will be changed? I wonder if the house will look strange? I wonder——' said Cara, half under her breath. She was not talking to him, yet perhaps if he had not been with her, she would not have said the words aloud. He was a kind of shield to her from others, an unconscious half-companion. She did not mind what she said when he was there. Sometimes she replied to him at random; often he so answered her, not knowing what she meant. It was from want of comprehension on his part, not want of attention; but it was simple carelessness on hers. He listened to these

wonderings of hers eagerly, with full determination to fathom what she meant.

‘He will be changed, and so will the house,’ said Roger. ‘We may be sure of it. You were but a child when you left; now you are a—young lady. Even if he was not changed, you would think him so,’ cried Roger, with insight which surprised himself; ‘but those who have grown up with you, Cara—I, for instance, who have seen you every day, I can never change. You may think so, but you will be mistaken. I shall always be the same.’

She turned to look at him, half amused, half wondering. ‘You, Roger; but what has that to do with it?’ she said. How little she cared! She had faith in him: oh, yes; did not think he would change; believed he would always be the same. What did it matter? It did not make her either sadder or gladder to know that it was unlikely there would be any alteration in him.

‘What are you doing here, Cara, when you ought to be looking after your guests, or playing croquet, or amusing yourself?’

‘I am amusing myself, Aunt Cherry, as much as I wish to amuse myself. It is not amusing to go away.’

‘My darling, we must think of your poor father,’ said Miss Cherry, her voice trembling; ‘and there are all your young friends. Will you go and help to form that game, Roger? They want a gentleman. Cara, dear, I would rather you did not walk with Roger Burchell like this, when everybody is here.’

‘He said he had something to show me,’ said Cara. ‘I was glad to get away. All this looks so like saying farewell; as if I might never be here again.’

‘Cara, if you make me cry, I shall not be fit to be seen; and we must not make a show of ourselves before all these people.’ Miss Cherry pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. ‘I am so silly; my eyes get so red for nothing. What did Roger have to show you? He ought to be at work, that boy.’

‘He has an aunt at Notting Hill,’ said Cara, with a soft laugh; ‘and he told me he meant to come to town on Sundays instead of coming here. He says he shall see me quite as often as usual. I suppose he thought I should miss him. Poor Roger! if that were all!’

‘But, Cara, we must not allow that,’ said Miss Cherry. ‘I must speak to his mother. See him every Sunday, as

usual! it is ridiculous; it must be put a stop to. Roger Burchell! a lad who is nobody, who has his way to make in the world, and neither connections, nor fortune, nor any advantage——'

Here Miss Cherry was arrested by Cara's look turned calmly upon her, without excitement or anxiety, yet with that half smile which shows when a young observer has seen the weak point in the elder's discourse.

'What should his connections or his fortune have to do with it if he wanted to see me and I wanted to see him?' said Cara; 'we have been friends all our lives. But do not make yourself uneasy, Aunt Cherry; for though I might, perhaps, like well enough to see Roger now and then, I don't want him every Sunday. What would papa say? Roger thinks Sunday in the Square is like Sunday here—church and then a stroll, and then church again. You know it was not like that when I was at home before.'

'No,' said Miss Cherry, with a sigh; 'but then it was different.' She had her own thoughts as to whose fault that was, and by whose influence James had been led away from natural churchgoing; but she was far too loyal, both to the dead and to the living, to show this. 'Cara,' she added, hurriedly, 'in that respect, things will be as you like best hereafter. You will be the one to settle what Sunday is to be—and what a great many other things are to be. You must realise what is before you, my dear child.'

'I can't realise Roger there in papa's library,' said Cara, 'or upstairs. Am I to live *there*? in the drawing-room. Will it never be changed?'

'It is so pretty, Cara—and you would like the things to be as pleased her,' said Miss Cherry, in trembling tones.

Cara did not make any response—her face wore a doubtful expression, but she did not say anything. She turned her back upon the landscape, and looked up at the house. 'Shall I never come back just the same?' she said. 'Roger says so; but he is not clever—how should he know? what should change me? But the Square is not like the Hill,' she added, with a little shiver. 'Papa will not think of me as you do—everything for Cara; that will make a change.'

'But you can think of him,' said Cherry, 'everything for *him*; and, perhaps, for a woman that is the happiest way of the two.'

Once more Cara was silent. Clouds of doubt, of reluctance, of unwilling repugnance, were floating through her mind. She had a horror and fear of the Square, in which her life was henceforward to be passed—and of her father, of whom she knew so much more than he was aware. For a moment the old tumult in her soul about the secret she had never told came surging back upon her, a sudden tide from which she could scarcely escape. ‘Come, Aunt Cherry,’ she said, suddenly seizing her astonished companion by the arm. ‘Come and play for us. We must have a dance on the lawn my last day.’

CHAPTER X.

THE SQUARE.

It was a rainy afternoon when Cara reached the Square. It had been settled, against Miss Cherry’s will, that she was to go alone. The girl, who was often ‘queer,’ especially when anything connected with her natural home, her father’s house, was in question, had requested that it should be so—and Miss Charity approved, to whose final decision everything was submitted at Sunninghill. ‘Don’t interfere with her,’ Miss Charity had said; ‘she is like her mother. She has a vein of caprice in her. You never could argue (if you remember) with poor Annie. You had either to give in to her, or to say no once for all, and stick to it. Carry is not like her mother all through—there are gleams of the Beresford in her. But there is a vein of caprice, and I wouldn’t cross her, just at this crisis of her life.’

‘But I don’t see why it should be such a crisis. It is a change of scene, to be sure, and leaving us ought to be a trial,’ said Miss Cherry, dubiously. ‘The feeling within herself was, that she would have been glad had she been more sure that this was a trial. Girls were ungrateful in their lightheartedness, and sometimes loved the risks of independence. ‘It is not as if she were going among strangers,’ said Miss Cherry. ‘She is going to her home, and to her father.’

‘A father whom she has never known since she was a child—a house that has never lost the shadow of that dying!’

‘Then why must not I go with her?’ said Miss Cherry.

The old lady shrugged her shoulders, but said no more. And Cara got her way. As she was to go alone, she was packed, with all her belongings, into the carriage; nurse going with her, who was to help in the housekeeping, and take care of the young mistress of the old familiar house. The railway, it is true, would have carried them there in half the time; but Cara liked the preparation of the long, silent drive, and it pleased the elder ladies that their darling should make her solitary journey so to her father's house. The road led through beautiful royal parks, more than one, and by glimpses of the pleasant river. It was like an old-fashioned expedition made in the days before railways, with full time for all the anticipations, all the dreams, of what was to come. Though her mind was full of natural excitement and sadness, Cara could not help feeling herself like one of the heroines of Miss Austen's novels as she drove along. She had plenty of grave matters to think about, and was very much in earnest as to her life generally; yet, with the unconscious doubleness of youth, she could not help feeling only half herself, and half Elizabeth Bennet or Catherine Moreland going off into the world. And, indeed, without sharing the difficulties of these young ladies, Cara Beresford in her own person had no small problem before her. To fill the place of her mother, an accomplished woman, she who was only a girl; to make his home pleasant to her father; to set agoing once more something like family life. And she only seventeen, and so differently situated, she said to herself, from other girls! Had she not enough to think of? The trees and the bridges, the gleams of shining river, the great stretches of wooded country, all glided past her like things in a dream. It was they that were moving, not she. Nurse talked now and then; but nurse's talking did not disturb Cara; she knew by long experience just how to put in convenient ayes and noes, so as to keep the good woman going. And thus she went on, her head full of thoughts. Her difficulties were more grave than those which generally fall to the lot of so young a girl—but, nevertheless, with the frivolity of youth, she could feel herself something like Catherine Moreland, hurrying along to Northanger Abbey, and all the wonders and mysteries there.

She had expected to find her father already arrived and awaiting her; but he did not come until she had been an hour or two in the house—which was half a relief and half an

offence to her. She was received with a kind of worship by John and cook, to whom their young mistress, whom they had only known as a child, was a wonder and delight, and who mingled a greater degree of affectionate familiarity with the awe they ought to have felt for her than was quite consistent with Cara's dignity. They were anxious to pet and make much of her on her arrival—cook hurrying upstairs, unnecessarily Cara thought, to show how prettily her room had been prepared; and John bringing her tea, with cake and the daintiest bread and butter, and a broad smile of pleasure on his face. Cara thought it incumbent upon her to send away the cake and bread and butter, taking only the tea, to prove beyond all power of misconception that she was no longer a child—but she was sorry for it after, when John, protesting and horrified, had carried it away downstairs again. Still, though one is slightly hungry, it is best to keep up one's dignity, and 'begin,' as Aunt Cherry said, 'as you meant to go on.' Cara would not let herself be governed by old servants, that she had determined—and it was best to show them at once that this could not be.

Then she went up with some shrinking, feeling like a sea-bather making the first plunge, into the drawing-room, which no one had used for the last five years. She was obliged to confess that it was very pretty, notwithstanding that it frightened her. She half expected some one to rise from the chair before the first newly-lighted October fire to receive her as she went in. The little cabinets, the pretty brackets for the china, the scraps of old lace upon the velvet, the glimmer of old, dim, picturesque mirrors, the subdued yet brilliant colour in the bits of tapestry, all moved her to admiration. At Sunninghill they had, as became a lady's house, many pretty things, but with as little idea of art as it is possible in the present day to succeed in having. Miss Cherry knew nothing of art; and it had been invented, Miss Charity thought, since her days, which was the time when people liked to have respectable solid furniture, and did not understand æsthetics. The graceful balance and harmony of this new old house gave Cara a new sensation of admiring pleasure—and yet she did not like it. It would be hard to tell what was the cause of the painful impression which prejudiced her mind—yet there it was. Her own mother—her dead mother—that visionary figure, half nurse, half goddess, which gives a quite visionary support and consolation to some motherless

children, did not exist for Cara. She remembered how she had been sent off to the Hill when they went away to enjoy themselves, and how she had been sent off to the nursery when they sat talking to each other. It had been a happy home, and she had been petted and made much of by times—but this was what she recollected most clearly. And then there rose up before her, intensified by distance, that scene in her mother's room, which she had never confided to any one. She resented this mystery that was in the past, which returned and wrapped her in a kind of mist when she came back. Why had not her parents been straightforward people, with no mysteries such, as Cara said to herself, she hated? Why was there a skeleton in the cupboard? All the things she had read in books about this had made Cara angry, and it vexed her to the heart to feel and know that there was one in her home. She had buried the secret so completely in her own bosom that it had made an aching spot all round it where it lay: like that bit of a garden which lies under a noxious shadow—like that bit of a field where a fire has been—was this place in her heart where her secret lay. She felt it, in all its force, when she came home. At the Hill there were no secrets; they lived with their windows open and their hearts, fearing no sudden appearance, no discovery. But here it seemed that the old trouble had been waiting all these years, till the girl went back who alone knew all about it, the father's past and the mother's past; and even the atmosphere of the long-shut-up house felt pernicious. Cara did not like to look round her as it came to be dark, lest she see *some one* sitting in the corner in the shadow. It seemed to her more than once that somebody moved in the distance, going out or coming in, with a sweep of a long skirt, just disappearing as she looked up. This meant, I suppose (or at least so many people would say), that her digestion was not in such good order as it should have been—but digestion was not a thing which came within Cara's range of thought.

Her father arrived about half-past six by the Continental train. Cara stood at the door of the drawing-room, with her heart beating, wondering if she ought to run down and receive him, or if he would come to her. She heard him ask if she had come, and then he added, 'I will go to my room at once, John. I suppose dinner is nearly ready. I did not expect to have been so late. Bring my things to my room.'

‘Shall I call Miss Cara, sir?’

‘No; never mind. I shall see her at dinner,’ he said.

And Cara instinctively closed the drawing-room door at which she had been standing, as she heard him begin to come up the stairs. She stood there, with her heart beating, in case he should call her; but he did not. Then she too went to dress, with a chilled and stifled sensation, the first sense of repulse which she had ever experienced. When she was ready, she went back again very quickly and noiselessly, leaving the door open. By-and-by her father’s step became audible coming down, and he paused when he got to the door; but then resumed and went on again, sending her word that she would find him in the dining-room. It was unreasonable, the high swelling of offence and injured pride that she felt in her heart—but there it was. Was this how he meant to use her—her, his only child—now the mistress of his house? She went down, after an interval of proud and painful reluctance, a slim, girlish creature, in her white dress, her blue eyes somewhat strained and large, more widely opened than was consistent with perfect composure. She was not beautiful, like her mother. A certain visionary youthful severity was in her looks. She was different altogether, different in every way, from the pet and darling of the ladies at the Hill. Her father had not seen her since she had leaped into long dresses and young-womanhood, and he was startled by the change. Involuntarily, as he looked at her, her mother’s description of the child Cara came back to his mind. Perhaps he was all the more quick to notice this that his eye had been caught as he paused at the drawing-room door by the last purchase he had made in bric-à-brac, the Buen Retiro cup, of which his wife had said playfully that Cara would insist that he should tell the dealer the exact value before he bought it. This strange idea brought a half smile to his face, and yet his memories were so far from smiling. The cup had been broken to bits in the careless packing of that last journey home, when bric-à-brac had lost all interest in the gathering mists of suffering and despondency—and then afterwards, in an interval of apparent improvement, had been carefully put together and placed on a shelf, high up, where its imperfections were not visible. It was the sight of it which had kept Beresford from going into the room. He would have made the effort

for Cara's sake, he thought, but that this relic, so connected with the last chapter of all, had thrust that recollection upon him. He had never entered poor Annie's drawing-room since the week she died.

'Well, Cara, my dear, I am glad to see you,' he said, putting his arm round his daughter, and kissing her. 'You must forgive me for not coming upstairs. How you have grown!—or rather, you have become a young lady all at once. I don't know that you are much taller.'

'No; I have not grown,' said Cara. 'I suppose the long dress makes a difference. It is that, perhaps.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Sit down, my dear; dinner waits. I have had a long journey, and I want something. I never eat much when I am travelling. I came by Dieppe, which is a route I detest. Ah, I forgot! You have never been across the Channel, yet, Cara.'

'No.'

They both recollected why—and that 'the next expedition' after those long honeymooning travels was to have been accompanied by 'the child.' Cara remembered this with a certain bitterness; her father merely with melancholy sentiment.

'Ah!' he said, vaguely, 'we must mend that—some day. And how are the aunts? I can fancy that my sister looks just as she always did. She and I are at the age when people change little. But Aunt Charity? she is getting quite an old woman now—over seventy. Have you been dull in the country, Cara? or have they petted you so much that you will feel it dull to be here?'

He looked at her with a smile which lit up his face, and touched her heart just a little; but the question touched something else than her heart—her pride and sense of importance.

'I was not dull,' she said. 'One is not dull when one has something to do—and is with those whom one loves.'

'Ah!' he said, looking at her with a little curiosity; 'that is a better way of putting it, certainly,' he added, with a smile.

Then there was a pause. John, behind Mr. Beresford's chair, who had been in the house when Cara was born, and who thought he knew his master thoroughly, had much ado not to interfere, to whisper some instructions in her father's

ear as to how a child like this should be dealt with, or to breathe into Cara's an entreaty that she would humour her papa. He said to his wife afterwards that to see them two sitting, pretending to eat their dinners, and never speaking, no more nor if they were wax images—or, when they did talk, talking like company—made him that he didn't know whether he was standing on his head or his heels. How many hints our servants could give us if decorum permitted their interference! John felt himself a true friend of both parties, anxious to bring them as near to each other as they ought to be; but he knew that it would have been as much as his place was worth had he ventured to say anything. So he stood regretfully, wistfully, behind backs and looked on. If he could but have caught Miss Cara's eye! but he did not, not even when, in the confusion of his feelings, he offered her mustard instead of sugar with her pudding. *Her* feelings were so confused also that she never noticed the mistake. Thus the dinner passed with nothing but the sparest company conversation. There were but these two in the world of their immediate family, therefore they had no safe neutral ground of brothers and sisters to talk about.

'Is your room comfortable?' Mr. Beresford said, when they had got through a comfortless meal. 'If I had been here sooner, I should have refurnished it; but you must do it yourself, Cara, and please your own taste.'

'I don't think I have any taste,' she said.

'Ah, well!—perhaps it does not matter much; but the things that pleased you at ten will scarcely please you at seventeen. Seventeen are you? and *out*, I suppose? One might have been sure of that. Cherry would have no peace till she had you to go to parties with her.'

'We very rarely go to parties,' said Cara, with dignity. 'Of course at seventeen one is grown up. One does not require parties to prove *that*.'

He looked at her again, and this time laughed. 'I am afraid you are very positive and very decided,' he said. 'I don't think it is necessary, my dear, to be so sure of everything. You must not think I am finding fault.'

Her heart swelled—what else could she think? She did not wish, however, to appear angry, which evidently was impolitic, but shifted the subject to her father's recent travels, on which there was much to be said. 'Are you going to the

geographical meeting? Are they to have one expressly for you, like last year?' she said, not without a hidden meaning, of which he was conscious in spite of himself.

'You know what they said last year? Of course there was no reason for it; for I am not an explorer, and discovered nothing; but how could I help it? No; there will be no meeting this time, thank Heaven.'

And he saw that a faint little smile came upon Cara's lips. Instead of being delighted to see that her father had come to such honour, this little creature had thought it humbug. So it was—but it galled him to know that his daughter felt it to be so. Had she laughed out, and given him an account of the scene at the Hill; how Aunt Cherry had read the account out of the papers with such joy and pleasure; and Aunt Charity had wiped her spectacles and taken the paper herself to read the record of his valiant deeds—the little family joke would have drawn them together, even if it had been half at his expense. But no man likes to feel that his claims to honour are judged coolly by his immediate belongings, and the little remark wounded him. This, he said to himself, was not the sort of sweet girl who would make the house once more a home to him. He let her go upstairs without saying anything of his further intentions for the evening. And Cara felt that she had been unsuccessful in the keynote she had struck; though without blaming herself seriously, for, after all, it was he and not she who ought to have struck this key-note. She went upstairs in a little flutter of dissatisfaction with herself and him. But, as soon as she had got upstairs, Cara, with true feminine instinct, began to make little overtures of reconciliation. She went round the room to see what could be done to make it more homelike. She lighted the candles on the mantelpiece, and placed some books uppermost on the table, about which she could talk to him. She was not fond of work in her own person, but she had read in good story-books that needlework was one of the accessories to an ideal scene of domesticity—therefore, she hunted up a piece of work and an oft-mislaid case with thimble and scissors, and placed them ready on a little table. Then she called John, softly, as he went upstairs, to ask him if her father took tea, or rather, when he took tea, the possibility of leaving out that ceremonial altogether not having occurred to her.

'If you please, miss,' said John, with a deprecating air,

'master has had his cup of coffee, and he's gone out. I think he ain't gone no further than next door; and I'll make bold to say as he'll be back—soon,' said John.

Cara went back to her chair, without a word; her heart beat high—her face grew crimson in spite of herself. She retreated to her seat and took up a book, and began to read at a furious pace. She did not very well know what it was about; but she had read a long chapter before John, going downstairs and then coming up again in a middle-aged, respectable butler's leisurely way, could place the little tea-tray on the table near her. There was but one cup. It was evident that she was expected to take this refreshment alone. She gave a little good-humoured nod at the man as he looked round, with the comprehensive glance of his class, to see if anything wanted removal—and went on reading. The book was about unconscious cerebration, and other not highly intelligible things. Some of the phrases in it got entangled, like the straws and floating rubbish on a stream, with the touch of wild commotion in her mind, and so lived in her after this mood and a great many others had passed away. She went on reading till she had heard John go down, and reach his own regions at the bottom of the stairs. Then she put the book down, and looked up, as if to meet the look of some one else who would understand her. Poor child! and there was no one there.

This was Cara's first night in the Square.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. MEREDITH.

It was Mrs. Meredith who lived next door—an old friend, who was the only person Mrs. Beresford had permitted to come and see her when she returned ill, and of whom Miss Cherry had felt with confidence that Cara would find a friend in her. She had lived there almost ever since Cara was born, with her two sons, boys a little older than Cara; a pretty gentle woman, 'not clever,' her friends said—'silly,' according to some critics, of whom poor Annie Beresford had been one—but very popular everywhere and pleasant; a woman

whom most people were glad to know. It would be hard to say exactly in what her charm lay. There were handsomer women than she to be met with by the score who were much less beloved—and as for her mind, it scarcely counted at all in the estimate of her merits. But she was kind, sympathetic, sweet-mannered—affectionate and caressing when it was becoming to be so—smiling and friendly everywhere. Great talkers liked her, for she would listen to them as if she enjoyed it; and silent people liked her, for she did not look bored by their side, but would make a little play of little phrases, till they felt themselves actually amusing. She had very sweet liquid brown eyes—not too bright or penetrating, but sympathetic always—and a soft, pretty white hand. She was not young, nor did she look younger than she was; but her sympathies flowed so readily, and her looks were so friendly, that she belonged to the younger part of the world always by natural right. Her boys were her chief thought and occupation. One of them was six, one four years older than Cara; so that Oswald was three-and-twenty and Edward on the eve of his majority when the girl arrived at her father's house. Mrs. Meredith's perpetual occupation with these boys, her happiness in their holiday times, her melancholy when they went to school, had kept her friends interested for a number of years. Men who breathed sighs of relief when the terrible period of the holidays came to an end, and their own schoolboys were got rid of, put on soft looks of pity when they heard that Oswald and Edward were gone too; and mothers who were themselves too thankful that no drownings or shootings, not even a broken collar-bone or a sprained ankle, had marked the blissful vacations in their own house, half cried with Mrs. Meredith over the silence of hers 'when the boys were away.' They came and carried her off to family dinners, and made little parties to keep her from feeling it; as if there had been no boys in the world but those two. 'For you know her circumstances are so peculiar,' her friends said. The peculiarity of her circumstances consisted in this, that, though she had lived alone for these fifteen years in the Square, she was not a widow—neither was she a separated or in any way blameable wife. All that could be said was that the circumstances were very peculiar. She who was so sweet, whom everybody liked, did not somehow 'get on' with her husband. "'Abody likes me but my man,' said a Scotch

fisherwoman in a similar position. Mrs. Meredith did not commit herself even to so terse a description. She said nothing at all about it. Mr. Meredith was in India—though whether he had always been there, or had judiciously retired to that wide place, in consequence of his inability to get on with the most universally-liked of women, it was not generally known. But there he was. He had been known to come home twice within the fifteen years, and had paid a visit at the Square among other visits he had paid—and his wife's friends had found no particular objections to him. But he had gone back again, and she had remained, placidly living her independent life. She was well off. Her boys were at Harrow first, and then at the University, where Edward still was disporting himself; though he had just got through his examination for the Indian Civil Service, and had more practical work in prospect. Oswald, who had ended his career at Oxford, was living at home; but even the grown-up son in the house had not removed any of her popularity. She had a perpetual levée every afternoon. Not a morning passed that two or three ladies did not rush in, in the sacred hours before luncheon, when nobody is out, to tell her or ask her about something; and the husbands would drop in on their way from business, from their offices or clubs, just for ten minutes before they went home. This was how her life was spent—and though sometimes she would speak of that life despondently, as one passed under a perpetual shadow, yet, in fact, it was a very pleasant, entertaining, genial life. To be sure, had she been passionately attached to the absent Mr. Meredith, she might have found drawbacks in it; but, according to appearances, this was scarcely the case, and perhaps never had been.

This lady was the first visitor Cara had in the Square. She came in next morning, about twelve o'clock, when the girl was languidly wondering what was to become of her. Cara had not spent a cheerful morning. Her father had come to breakfast, and had talked to her a little about ordinary matters, and things that were in the newspaper. He was as much puzzled as a man could be what to do with this seventeen-year-old girl whom he had sent for, as a matter of course, when he himself came home to settle, but whom now he found likely to be an interruption to all his habits. He did not know Cara, and was somehow uneasy in

her presence, feeling in her a suspicion and distrust of himself which he could by no means account for. And Cara did not know him, except that she did distrust and suspect him, yet expected something from him, she could not tell what; something better than the talk about collisions and shipwrecks in the papers. She tried to respond, and the breakfast was not a sullen or silent meal. But what a contrast it was from the bright table at the Hill, with the windows open to the lawn, and all the spontaneous happy talk, which was not made up for any one, but flowed naturally, like the air they breathed! Mr. Beresford was much more accomplished than Aunt Cherry; a clever man, instead of the mild old maiden whom everybody smiled at, but—— All this went through Cara's mind as she poured out his coffee, and listened to his account of the new steamboat. There was a perfect ferment of thought going on in her brain while she sat opposite to him, saying yes and no, and now and then asking a question, by way of showing a little interest. She was asking herself how things would have been if her mother had lived; how they would have talked then: whether they would have admitted her to any share in the talk, or kept her outside, as they had done when she was a child? All these questions were jostling each other in her mind, and misty scenes rising before her, one confusing and mixing up with the other; the same breakfast table, as she remembered it of old, when the father and mother in their talk would sometimes not hear her questions, and sometimes say, 'Don't tease, child,' and sometimes bid her run away to the nursery; and as it might have been with her mother still sitting by, and herself a silent third person. Mr. Beresford had not a notion what the thoughts were which were going on under Cara's pretty hair, so smoothly wound about her head, and shining in the autumn sunshine, and under the pretty dark blue morning dress which 'threw up,' as Cherry meant it to do, the girl's whiteness and brightness. She could make *him* out to some degree, only putting more meaning in him than he was himself at all aware of; but he could not make out her. Did thought dwell at all in such well-shaped little heads, under hair so carefully coiled and twisted? He did not know, and could no more divine her than if she had been the Sphinx in person; but Cara, if she went wrong, did so by putting too much meaning into him.

When breakfast was over, he rose up, still holding his paper in his hand. 'I am afraid you will feel the want of your usual occupations,' he said. 'Lessons are over for you, I suppose? It is very early to give up education. Are you reading anything? You must let me know what you have been doing, and if I can help you.'

How helpless he looked standing there, inspecting her! but he did not look so helpless as he felt. How was he, a man who had never done any of life's ordinary duties, to take the supervision of a girl into his hands? If she had been a boy, he might have set her down by his side (the confusion of pronouns is inevitable) to work at Greek—a Greek play, for instance, which is always useful; but he supposed music and needlework would be what she was thinking of. No; if she had been a boy, he would have done better than take her to his study and set her down to a Greek play; he could have sent her to the University, like Edward Meredith, like every properly educated young man. But a girl of seventeen, he had always understood, was of an age to take the control of her father's house—was 'out'—a being to be taken into society, to sit at the head of his table (though rather young); and the idea that she might require occupation or instruction between the moments of discharging these necessary duties had not occurred to him. It did now, however, quite suddenly. What was she going to do? When he went into his library, she would go to the drawing-room. Would she take her needlework? would she go to the long disused piano? What would the young strange female creature do?

'Thank you, papa,' said Cara; which was of all other the most bewildering reply she could have given him. He gazed at her again, and then went away in his utter helplessness.

'You will find me in the library, if you want me,' he said aloud. But in himself he said, with more confidence, 'Mrs. Meredith will know;' or rather, perhaps, if the truth must be said, he thought, '*She* will know. She will see at once what ought to be done. She will tell me all about it to-night!' And with this consolation he went into his library and betook himself to his important morning's work. He had to verify a quotation, which he thought had been wrongly used in his friend Mr. Fortis' book about Africa. He had to write to one or two Fellows of his pet Society,

about a series of lectures on an interesting point of comparative science, which he thought the great authority on the subject might be persuaded to give. He had to write to Mr. Sienna Brown about a Titian which had been repainted and very much injured, and about which he had been asked to give his opinion by the noble proprietor, whom he had met on his return home. It will be perceived that it would have been a serious disadvantage to public interests had Mr. Beresford been required to withdraw his thoughts from such important matters, and occupy them with the education of an unremarkable girl.

And Cara went upstairs. She had already seen cook, who had kindly told her what she thought would be 'very nice' for dinner, and had agreed humbly; but had not, perhaps, been quite so humble when cook entreated 'Miss Cara, dear,' with the confidence of an old servant, not to be frightened, and assured her that she'd soon get to know her papa's ways.

When she got to the drawing-room, she went first to the windows and looked out, and thought that a few more plants in the balcony would be an advantage, and recollected how she used to play in the Square, and gave a side-long glance at the railings of next door, wondering whether 'the boys' were at home, and if they had changed. Then she came in, and went to the fire, and looked at herself and the big silent room behind her in the great mirror over the mantelpiece. Cara was not vain—it was not to see how she looked that she gazed wistfully into that reflection of the room in which she was standing, so rich and full with all its pictures, its china, its tapestries and decorations confronting her like a picture, with one lonely little girl in it, in a dark blue dress and white collar, and big, sad, strained blue eyes. What a forlorn little thing that girl seemed! nobody to interchange looks with even, except herself in the glass; and the room so crowded with still life, so destitute of everything else: so rich, so warm, so beautiful, so poor, so destitute, so lonely! What was she to do with herself for the long, solitary day? She could not go out, unless she went with nurse, as she used to do when she was a child. She was an open-air girl, loving freedom, and had been used to roam about as she pleased in the sweet woods about the Hill. You may imagine how lost the poor child felt herself in those stony regions round the Square.

And it was just then that Mrs. Meredith arrived. She

came in, rustling in her pretty rich silk gown, which was dark blue too, like Cara's. She came and took the girl into her kind arms and kissed her. 'If I had known when you were coming yesterday, I should have been here to receive you,' she said; 'my poor, dear child, coming back all by yourself! Why did not Aunt Cherry come with you, to get you a little used to it before you were left alone?'

'We thought it was best,' said Cara, feeling all at once that she had brought the greatest part of her troubles on herself. 'We thought papa would like it best.'

'Now, my dear,' said Mrs. Meredith, giving her a kiss, and then shaking a pretty finger at her, 'you must not begin by making a bugbear of papa. What he wishes is that you should be happy. Don't look sad, my darling. Ah, yes, I know it is a trial coming back here! It is a trial to me even,' said Mrs. Meredith, looking round and drying her soft eyes, 'to come into your poor mamma's room, and see everything as she left it; and think what a trial it must be to *him*, Cara?'

'He has never been here,' said the girl, half melted, half resisting.

'Poor soul!' said Mrs. Meredith. 'Poor man! Oh, Cara! if it be hard for you, think what it is for him! You are only a child, and you have all your life before you, you dear young happy thing.'

'I am not so very happy.'

'For the moment, my darling; but wait a little, wait,' said the kind woman, her eyes lighting up—'till the boys come home. There, you see what a foolish woman I am, Cara. I think everything mends when the boys come home. I ought to say when Edward comes home, to be sure, for I have Oswald with me now. But Edward always was your friend; don't you remember? Oswald was older; but it makes a great difference somehow when they are men. A man and a boy are two different things; and it is the boy that I like the best. But I have been so calculating upon you, my dear. You must run in half-a-dozen times a day. You must send for me whenever you want me. You must walk with me when I go out. I have no daughter, Cara, and you have no mother. Come, darling, shall it be a bargain?'

The tears were in this sweet woman's eyes, whom everybody loved. Perhaps she did not mean every word she said—who does? but there was a general truth of feeling in it all,

that kept her right. Cara ran straight into her arms, and cried upon her shoulder. Perhaps because she was frightened and distrustful in other particulars of her life, she was utterly believing here. Here was the ideal for which she had looked—a friend, who yet should be something more than a friend; more tender than Cara could remember her mother to have been, yet something like what an ideal mother, a mother of the imagination, would be. Sweet looks, still beautiful, the girl thought in the enthusiasm of her age, yet something subdued and mild with experience—an authority, a knowledge, a power which no contemporary could have. Cara abandoned herself in utter and total forgetfulness of all prejudices, resistances, and doubts, to this new influence. Her mother's friend, the boys' mother, who had been her own playmates, and about whom she was so curious, without knowing it—her nearest neighbour, her natural succour, a daughterless woman, while she was a motherless girl. Happiness seemed to come back to her with a leap. 'I shall not mind if I may always come to you, and ask you about everything,' she said.

'And of course you must do that. Did not Cherry tell you so? I thought Cherry would have been faithful to me. Ah! she did? then I am happy, dear; for if I have one weakness more than another it is that my friends should not give me up. But Cherry should have come with you,' said Mrs. Meredith, shaking her head.

'It was all for papa——'

'But that is what I find fault with—papa's only daughter, only child, thinking for a moment that her happiness was not what he wanted most.'

Cara drooped her guilty head. She was guilty; yes, she did not deny it; but probably this goddess-woman, this ideal aid and succour, did not know how little in the happier days had been thought of Cara. *She* had always thought of 'the boys' first of all; but then Mr. Meredith—Cara had an odd sort of recollection somehow that Mr. Meredith was not first, and that perhaps this might account for the other differences. So she did not say anything, but sat down on a stool at her new-old friend's feet, and felt that the strange, rich, beautiful room had become home.

'Now I never could do anything like this,' said Mrs. Meredith, looking round. 'I am fond of china too; but I never know what is good and what is bad; and sometimes I see

your papa take down a bit which I think beautiful, and look at it with such a face. How is one to know,' she said, laughing merrily, 'if one is not clever? I got the book with all the marks in it, but, my dear child, I never recollect one of them; and then such quantities of pretty china are never marked at all. Ah, I can understand why he doesn't come here! I think I would make little changes, Cara. Take down that, for instance'—and she pointed at random to the range of velvet-covered shelves, on the apex of which stood the Buen Retiro cup—and put a picture in its place. Confuse him by a few changes. Now stop: is he in? I think we might do it at once, and then we could have him up.'

Cara shrank perceptibly. She drew herself a little away from the stranger's side. 'You are frightened,' cried Mrs. Meredith, with a soft laugh. 'Now, Cara, Cara, this is exactly what I tell you must not be. You don't know how good and gentle he is. I can talk to him of anything—even my servants, if I am in trouble with them; and every woman in London, who is not an angel, is in trouble with her servants from time to time. Last time my cook left me—— Why, there is nothing,' said Mrs. Meredith, reflectively, 'of which I could not talk to your papa. He is kindness itself.'

This was meant to be very reassuring, but somehow it did not please Cara. A half resentment (not so distinct as that) came into her mind that her father, who surely belonged to her, rather than to any other person on the face of the earth, should be thus explained to her and recommended. The feeling was natural, but painful, and somewhat absurd, for there could be no doubt that she did not know him, and apparently Mrs. Meredith did; and what she said was wise; only somehow it jarred upon Cara, who was sensitive all over, and felt every touch, now here, now there.

'Well, my dear, never mind, if you don't like it, for to-day; but the longer it is put off the more difficult it will be. Whatever is to be done ought to be done at once I always think. He should not have taken a panic about this room; why should he? Poor dear Annie! everything she loved ought to be dear to him; that would be my feeling. And Cara, dear, you might do a great deal; you might remove this superstition for ever, for I do think it is superstition. However, if you wish me to say no more about it, I will hold my tongue. And now what shall we do to-day? Shall we

go out after luncheon? As soon as you have given your papa his lunch, you shall put on your things, and I will call for you. My people never begin to come before four; and you shall come in with me and see them. That will amuse you, for there are all sorts of people. And your papa and you are going to dine with us; I told him last night you must come. You will see Oswald and renew your acquaintance with him, and we can talk. Oswald is very good-looking, Cara. Do you remember him? he has dark hair now and dark eyes; but I wish he had always remained a boy; though of course that is not possible,' she said, shaking her head with a sigh. 'Now I must run away, and get through my morning's work. No, don't disturb your papa; evening is his time. I shall see him in the evening. But be sure you are ready to go out at half-past two.'

How little time there seemed to be for moping or thinking after this visit! Cara made a rapid survey of the drawing-room when she returned to it, to see what changes could be made, as her friend suggested. She would not have had the courage to do any such thing, had it not been suggested to her. It was her father's room, not hers; and what right had she to meddle? But somewhat a different light seemed to have entered with her visitor. Cara saw, too, when she examined, that changes could be made which would make everything different yet leave everything fundamentally the same. Her heart fluttered a little at the thought of such daring. She might have taken such a thing upon her at the Hill, without thinking whether or not she had a right to do it; but then she never could have had time to move anything without Miss Charity or Miss Cherry coming in, in the constant cheery intercourse of the house. But for these changes she would have abundant time; no one would come to inspect while her re-arrangements were going on. However, there was no time to think of them now; the day was busy and full. She came downstairs for luncheon with her bonnet on, that she might not be too late. 'I am going out with Mrs. Meredith,' she said to her father, in explanation of her out-of-door costume.

'Ah, that is right!' he said. 'And we are to dine there this evening.' Even he looked brighter and more genial when he said this. And the languid day had grown warm and bright, full of occupations and interest; and to keep Mrs. Meredith *waiting*—to be too late—that would never do.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR.

MRS. MEREDITH'S drawing-room was not like the twin room next door. It was more ornate, though not nearly so beautiful. The three windows were draped in long misty white curtains, which veiled the light even at its brightest and made a curious artificial semblance of mystery and retirement on this autumn afternoon, when the red sunshine glowed outside. Long looking-glasses here and there reflected these veiled lights. There was a good deal of gilding, and florid furniture, which insisted on being looked at. Cara sat down on an ottoman close to the further window after their walk, while Mrs. Meredith went to take off her bonnet. She wanted to see the people arrive, and was a little curious about them. There were, for a country house, a good many visitors at the Hill; but they came irregularly, and sometimes it would happen that for days together not a soul would appear. But Mrs. Meredith had no more doubt of the arrival of her friends than if they had all been invited guests. Cara was still seated alone, looking out, her pretty profile relieved against the white curtain like a delicate little cameo, when the first visitor arrived, who was a lady, and showed some annoyance to find the room already occupied. 'I thought I must be the first,' she said, giving the familiar salutation of a kiss to Mrs. Meredith as she entered. 'Never mind, it is only Cara Beresford,' said that lady, and led her friend by the hand to where two chairs were placed at the corner of the fire. Here they sat and talked in low tones with great animation, the 'he says' and 'she says' being almost all that reached Cara's ear, who, though a little excited by the expectation of 'company,' did not understand this odd version of it. By-and-by, however, the lady came across to her and began to talk, and Cara saw that some one else had arrived. The room filled gradually after this, two or three people coming and going, each of them in their turn receiving a few minutes' particular audience. Nothing could be more evident than that it was to see the lady of the house that these people came; for, though the visitors generally knew each other, there was not much general conversation. Every new-comer directed

his or her glance to Mrs. Meredith's corner, and, if the previous audience was not concluded, relapsed into a corner, and talked a little to the next person, whoever that might be. In this way Cara received various points of enlightenment as to this new society. Most of them had just returned to town. They talked of Switzerland, they talked of Scotland; of meeting So-and-so here and there; of this one who was going to be married, and that one who was supposed to be dying; but all this talk was subsidiary to the grand object of the visit, which was the personal interview. Cara, though she was too young to relish her own spectator position, could not help being interested by the way in which her friend received her guests. She had a different aspect for each. The present one, as Cara saw looking up, after an interval, was a man, with whom Mrs. Meredith was standing in front of the furthest window. She was looking up in his face, with her eyes full of interest, not saying much; listening with her whole mind and power, every fold in her dress, every line of her hair and features, falling in with the sentiment of attention. Instead of talking, she assented with little nods of her head and soft acquiescent or remonstrative movements of her delicate hands, which were lightly clasped together. This was not at all her attitude with the ladies, whom she placed beside her, in one of the low chairs, with little caressing touches and smiles and low-voiced talk. How curious it was to watch them one by one! Cara felt a strong desire, too, to have something to tell; to go and make her confession or say her say upon some matter interesting enough to call forth that sympathetic, absorbed look—the soft touch upon her shoulder, or half embrace.

It was tolerably late when the visitors went away—half-past six, within an hour of dinner. The ladies were the last to go, as they had been the first to come; and Cara, relieved by the departure of the almost last stranger, drew timidly near the fire, when Mrs. Meredith called her. It was only as she approached—and the girl felt cold, sitting so far off and being so secondary, which is a thing that makes everybody chilly—that she perceived somebody remaining, a gentleman seated in an easy-chair—an old gentleman (according to Cara; he was not of that opinion himself), who had kept his place calmly for a long time without budging, whosoever went or came.

‘Well, you have got through the heavy work,’ said this

patient visitor, 'and I hope you have sent them off happier. It has not been your fault, I am sure, if they are not happier; they have each had their audience and their appropriate word.'

'You always laugh at me, Mr. Somerville: why should I not say what I think they will like best to the people who come to see me?'

'Ah, when you put it like that!' he said; 'certainly, why shouldn't you? But I think some of those good people thought that you gave them beautiful advice and consolation, didn't you? I thought it seemed like that as I looked on.'

'You are always so severe. Come, my darling, you are out of sight there; come and smooth down this mentor of mine by the sight of your young face. This is my neighbour's child, Miss Beresford, from next door.'

'Ah, *the* neighbour!' said Mr. Somerville, with a slight emphasis, and then he got up somewhat stiffly and made Cara his bow. 'Does not he come for his daily bread like the rest?' he said, in an undertone.

'Mr. Beresford is going to dine with me to-night, with Cara, who has just come home,' said Mrs. Meredith, with a slight shade of embarrassment on her face.

'Ah! from school?' said this disagreeable old man.

It had grown dark, and the lady herself had lighted the candles on the mantelpiece. He was sitting immediately under a little group of lights in a florid branched candlestick, which threw a glow upon his baldness. Cara, unfavourably disposed, thought there was a sneer instead of a smile upon his face, which was partially in shade.

'I have never been to school,' said the girl, unreasonably angry at the imputation; and just then someone else came in—another gentleman, with whom Mrs. Meredith, who had advanced to meet him, lingered near the door. Mr. Somerville watched over Cara's head, and certainly his smile had more amusement than benevolence in it.

'Ah!' he said again, 'then you miss the delight of feeling free: no girl who has not been at school can understand the pleasure of not being at school any longer. Where have you been, then, while your father has been away?'

'With my aunts, at Sunninghill,' said Cara, unnecessarily communicative, as is the habit of youth.

'Ah, yes, with your aunts! I used to know some of your

family. Look at her now,' said the critic, more to himself than to Cara—'this is a new phase. This one she is smoothing down.'

Cara could not help a furtive glance. The new comer had said something, she could not hear what, and stood half-defiant at the door. Mrs. Meredith's smile spoke volumes. She held out her hand with a deprecating, conciliatory look. They could not hear what she said; but the low tone, the soft aspect, the extended hand, were full of meaning. The old gentleman burst into a broken, hoarse laugh. It was because the new-comer, melting all at once, took the lady's hand and bowed low over it, as if performing an act of homage. Mr. Somerville laughed, but the stranger did not hear.

'This is a great deal too instructive for you,' he said. 'Come and tell me about your aunts. You think me quite an old man, eh? and I think you quite a little girl.'

'I am not so young! I am seventeen.'

'Well! And I am seven-and-fifty—not old at all—a spruce and spry bachelor, quite ready to make love to any one; but such are the erroneous ideas we entertain of each other. Have you known Mrs. Meredith a long time? or is this your first acquaintance?'

'Oh, a very long time—almost since ever I was born!'

'And I have known her nearly twenty years longer than that. Are you very fond of her? Yes, most people are. So is your father, I suppose, like the rest. But now you are the mistress of the house, eh? you should not let your natural-born subjects stray out of your kingdom o' nights.'

'I have not any kingdom,' said Cara, mournfully. 'The house is so sad. I should like to change it if papa would consent.'

'That would be very good,' said the volunteer counsellor, with alacrity. 'You could not do anything better, and I dare say he will do it if you say so. A man has a great deal of tenderness for his wife's only child when he has lost her. You have your own love and the other too.'

'Have I?' said the girl wistfully. Then she remembered that to talk of her private affairs and household circumstances with a stranger was a wonderful dereliction of duty. She made herself quite stiff accordingly in obedience to propriety, and changed her tone,

'Is not Oswald at home?' she said. 'I thought I should be sure to see him.'

'Oswald is at home, but he keeps away at this hour. He overdoes it, I think; but sons like to have their mothers to themselves: I don't think they like her to have such troops of friends. And Oswald, you know, is a man, and would like to be master.'

'He has no right to be master!' said Cara, the colour rising on her cheeks. 'Why should not she have her friends?'

'That is exactly what I tell him; but most likely he will understand you better. He is not my ideal of a young man; so you have no call to be angry with me on account of Oswald.'

'I—angry with—you; when I don't know you—when I never saw you before! I beg your pardon,' cried Cara, fearing that perhaps this might sound rude; but if it was rude it was true.

'Must you go?' said Mrs. Meredith to her visitor. 'Well, I will not delay you, for it is late; but that is all over, is it not? I cannot afford to be misunderstood by anyone I care for. Won't you say "How d'ye do?" to Mr. Somerville, my old friend, whom you see always, and Miss Beresford, my young friend, whom you have never seen before?'

'I have not time, indeed,' said the stranger, with a vague bow towards the fireplace; 'but I go away happy—it is all over, indeed. I shall know better than ever to listen to detractors and mischief-makers again.'

'That is right,' she said, giving him her hand once more. When he was gone she turned back with a little air of fatigue. 'Somebody had persuaded that foolish boy that I thought him a bore. He is not a bore—except now and then; but he is too young,' said Mrs. Meredith, shaking her head. 'You young people are so exigent, Cara. You want always to be first; and in friendship that, you know, is impossible. All are equal on that ground.'

'I am glad you have a lesson now and then,' said Mr. Somerville. 'You know my opinion on that subject.'

'Are you going to dine with us, dear Mr. Somerville?' said Mrs. Meredith, sweetly, looking at her watch. 'Do. You know Mr. Beresford is coming, who is very fine company indeed. No? I am so sorry. It would be so much more amusing for him, not to speak of Cara and me.'

'I am very sorry I can't amuse you to-night,' he said,

getting to his feet more briskly than Cara expected. Mrs. Meredith laughed; and there was a certain sound of hostility in the laugh, as though she was glad of the little prick she had bestowed.

'Cara, you must run and dress,' she said; 'not any toilette to speak of, dear. There will only be your father and Oswald; but you must be quick, for we have been kept very late this evening. I wonder you can resist that young face,' she said, as Cara went away. 'You are fond of youth, I know.'

'I am not fond of affording amusement,' he said. He limped slightly as he walked, which was the reason he had allowed Cara to go before him. 'Yes; I like youth. Generally it makes few phrases, and it knows what it means.'

'Which is just what I dislike.'

'Yes; elderly sirens naturally do. But next time Beresford comes to dine, and you ask me, if you will give me a little longer notice I will come, for I want to meet him.'

'Let it be on Saturday, then,' she said; 'that is, if he has no engagement. I will let you know.'

'As if she did not know what engagements he had!' Mr. Somerville said to himself: 'as if he ever dreamt of going anywhere that would interfere with his visits here!' He struck his stick sharply against the stairs as he went down. He had no sense of hostility to Mrs. Meredith, but rather that kind of uneasy liking akin to repugnance, which made him wish to annoy her. He felt sure she was made angry by the sound of his stick on the stairs. Her household went upon velvet, and made no noise; for though she was not fanciful she had nerves, and was made to start and jump by any sudden noise.

Cara heard him go with his stick along the Square, as nurse, who was her maid, closed the windows of her room. The sound got less distinct after this, but still she could hear it gradually disappearing. What a disagreeable old man he was, though he said he did not think himself old; at seven-and-fifty! Cara thought seven-and-twenty oldish, and seven-and-thirty the age of a grandfather; and yet he did not think himself old! So strange are the delusions which impartial people have to encounter in this world. Nurse interrupted her thoughts by a question about her dress. One of her very prettiest evening dresses lay opened out upon her bed.

'That is too fine,' said Cara; 'we are to be quite alone.'

'You haven't seen Mr. Oswald, have you, Miss Cara, dear? He has grown up that handsome you would not know him. He was always a fine boy; but now—I don't know as I've ever seen a nicer-looking young man.'

'I will have my plain white frock, please, nurse—the one I wore last night,' said Cara, absolutely unaware of any connection that could exist between Oswald Meredith's good looks and her second-best evening dress—a dress that might do for a small dance, as Aunt Cherry had impressed upon her. It never occurred to the girl that her own simple beauty could be heightened by this frock or that. Vanity comes on early or late, according to the character; but, except under very favourable (or unfavourable) circumstances, seldom develops in early youth. Cara had not even begun to think whether she herself was pretty or not, and she would have scorned with hot shame and contempt the idea of dressing for effect. People only think of dress when they have self-consciousness. She did not understand enough of the a, b, c of that sentiment to put any meaning to what nurse said, and insisted upon her plain muslin gown, laughing at the earnestness of the attendant. 'It is too fine,' she said. 'Indeed I am not obstinate: it would be a great deal too fine.' Her father was waiting for her in the hall when the simple toilette was completed, and Mrs. Meredith had not yet made her appearance when the two went into the drawing-room next door. Mr. Beresford sat down with his eyes turned towards the door. 'She is almost always late,' he said, with a smile. He was a different man here—indulgent, gentle, fatherly. Mrs. Meredith came in immediately after, with pretty lace about her shoulders and on her head. 'Oswald is late, as usual,' she said, putting her hand into Mr. Beresford's. He looked at her, smiling, with a satisfied friendly look, as if his eyes loved to dwell upon her. He smiled at Oswald's lateness; did not look cross, as men do when they are waiting for their dinner. 'Cara is punctual, you see,' he said, with a smile.

'Cara is a dear child,' said Mrs. Meredith. 'She has been with me all day. How odd that you should be made complete by a daughter and I by a son, such old friends as we are! Ah! here is Oswald. Would you have known him, Cara? Oswald, this is——'

'There is no need to tell me who it is,' said Oswald. Cara

saw, when she looked at him, that what the others had said was true. It did not move her particularly, but still she could see that he was very handsome, as everybody had told her. He took her hand, which she held out timidly, and, without any ceremony, drew it within his arm. 'We must go to dinner at once,' he said, 'or Sims will put poison in the soup. She longs to poison me, I know, in my soup, because I am always late; but I hope she will let me off for your sake, Cara. And so really you are little Cara? I did not believe it, but I see it is true now.'

'Why did you not believe it? I think I should have known you,' said Cara, 'if I had met you anywhere. It is quite true; but you are just like Oswald all the same.'

'What is quite true?' Oswald was a great deal more vain than Cara was, being older and having had more time to see the effect of his good looks. He laughed, and did not push his question any further. It was a pleasant beginning. He had his mother's sympathetic grace of manner, and, Cara felt at once, understood her and all her difficulties at a glance, as Mrs. Meredith had done. How far this was true may be an open question; but she was convinced of it, which for the moment was enough.

'We did not come downstairs so ceremoniously last time we met,' he said. 'When you came for the nursery tea, with nurse behind you. I think Edward held the chief place in your affections then. He was nearer your age; but thank Heaven that fellow is out of the way, and I have a little time to make the running before he comes back!'

Cara did not know what it meant to 'make the running,' and was puzzled. She was not acquainted with any slang except that which has crept into books, but an expression of pleasure in Edward's absence appalled her. 'I remember him best,' she said, 'because he was more near my age; but you were both big boys—too big to care for a little thing like me. I remember seeing you come in with a latch-key one afternoon and open the door—ah!' said Cara, with a little cry. It had been on the afternoon of her mother's death when she had been placed at the window to look for her father's coming, and had seen the two big boys in the afternoon light, and watched them, with an interest which quite distracted her attention for the moment, fitting the key into the door.

'What is it?' he said, looking at her very kindly. 'You

have not been here for a long time—yes, it must bring back so many things. Look, Cara! Sims is gracious; she will not poison me this time. She has not even frowned at me, and it is all because of you.’

‘I like Sims,’ said Cara, her heart rising, she could not tell why. ‘I like everybody I used to know.’

‘So do I—because you do; otherwise I am not so fond of my fellow-creatures; some of them plague one’s life out. What are you going to do when you get used to the excitement of seeing us all again? You will find yourself very badly off for something to do.’

‘Do you?’ said Cara, innocently.

‘My mother does for me. She thinks me very idle. So I am, I suppose. What is the good of muddling what little brains one has in work? One in a family who does that is enough. Edward is that excellent person. He goes in for Greek so that my head aches; though why he should, being intended for the Civil Service, I don’t know.’

‘Won’t it do him any good?’ said Cara, with regret. She was practical, and did not like to hear of this waste of labour. ‘Is Edward—changed—like you?’ she added softly, after a pause. He looked at her with laughing bright eyes, all softened and liquid with pleasure. He knew what she meant, and that his handsome face was having its natural effect upon Cara; though, being much older than Cara, he could not have believed how little effect his good looks really had.

‘I think he is very like what he always was,’ he said; ‘he is such a good fellow, Cara. If anyone asks you which is the best of the Merediths, say Edward. You may be sure you will be right. Listen what the elders are saying; they are talking about you and me.’

‘Why about you and me?’ Cara was always slightly alarmed to hear that she was being talked of. It roused the latent suspicion in her which had been startled into being at her mother’s death. She stopped talking, and looked at the other two. His mother was opposite to Oswald, and her father was opposite to her. What an odd arrangement it seemed when you came to think of it! If papa had got one of the boys, and she, Cara, had fallen to the lot of Mrs. Meredith—would that have been better? She looked at Oswald’s mother and wondered; then bethought herself of the Hill and blushed. No, such an idea was nothing but treachery

to the Hill, where it was Cara, and no other, who was the chosen child.*

'She has grown into a little lily,' said Mrs. Meredith. 'She is shy, but open and winning, and I like girls to be shy like that. I do not wonder that you are proud of her.'

'Am I proud of her? I am not sure. She is nice-looking, I think.'

'Nice-looking? She has grown into a little lily. It is wonderful how she blends two likenesses; I see you both. Ah! have I said too much? A happy child so often does that; you will forgive me if I say anything that hurts——'

'You could not say anything that hurts,' he said in a low voice, 'it would not hurt coming from you.'

'Well, perhaps it ought not,' she said, with a smile, 'because it is said in true friendship. I noticed that at once in Cara—sometimes one and sometimes the other—like both. That is not the case with my boys. I shall not have Edward till Christmas. You know it has always been my happy time when the boys were here.'

'Is Oswald doing anything—?' A close observer would have seen that Mr. Beresford was not fond of Oswald. He was not nearly so well-disposed to him as Mrs. Meredith was to Cara. Perhaps it was purely on moral grounds and justifiable; perhaps the young man and his senior came in each other's way more than the girl and the matron did. This abrupt question rather put a stop to poor Mrs. Meredith. She blushed a little and faltered as she replied.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE.

CARA's second evening at home was passed much more happily than the first, thanks to Mrs. Meredith, and her spirits rose in consequence; but next morning there ensued a fall, as was natural, in her spiritual barometer. She went to the window in the drawing-room when she was all alone, and gazed wistfully at as much as she could see of the step and entrance of the house next door. Did they mean her to 'run

in half-a-dozen times a day,' as Mrs. Meredith had said? Cara had been brought up in her aunt's old-fashioned notions, with strenuous injunctions not 'to make herself cheap,' and to cultivate 'a proper pride.' She had often been told that running into sudden intimacy was foolish, and that a girl should be rather shy than eager about overtures of ordinary friendship. All these things restrained her, and her own disposition which favoured all reserves. But she could not help going to the window and looking out wistfully. Only a wall between them! and how much more cheerful it was on the other side of that wall. Her heart beat as she saw Oswald come out, not because it was Oswald—on the whole she would have preferred his mother; but solitude ceased to be solitude when friendly figures thus appear, even outside. Oswald glanced up and saw her. He took off his hat—he paused—finally, he turned and came up the steps just underneath where she was standing. In another moment he came in, his hat in his hand, his face full of brightness of the morning. Nurse showed him in with a sort of affectionate enthusiasm. 'Here is Mr. Oswald, Miss Cara, come to see you.'

The women servants were all the slaves of the handsome young fellow. Wherever he went he had that part of the community on his side.

'I came to see that you are not the worse for your dull dinner last evening,' he said. 'It used to be etiquette to ask for one's partner at a ball; how much more after a domestic evening. Have you a headache? were you very much bored? It is for my interest to know, that I may be able to make out whether you will come again.'

'Were *you* bored that you ask me?' said Cara. 'I was very happy.'

'And, thanks to you, *I* was very happy,' he said. 'Clearly four are better company than three. Your father and my mother have their own kind of talking. Why, I have not been in this room since I was a child; how much handsomer it is than ours! Come, Cara, tell me all about the pictures and the china. Of course you must be a little connoisseur. Should one say connoisseuse? I never know. *Virtuosa*, that is a prettier word, and we are all in the way of the cardinal virtues here.'

'But I am not at all a *virtuosa*. I don't know. I was a child, too, when I used to be at home, and I suppose it hurts

papa to come into this room. He has never been here since I came; never at all, I think, since mamma died.'

'Does he leave you by yourself all the evening? what a shame!' said Oswald. 'Is he so full of sentiment as that? One never knows people. Come, Cara, if that is the case, it is clear that I must spend the evenings with you.'

Cara laughed frankly at the suggestion. She did not understand what he meant by a slight emphasis upon the pronouns, which seemed to point out some balance of duties. She said, 'I have only been here for two evenings. The first was very dull. I had nothing to read but that book, and I was not happy. The second was last night. Oh, I am not accustomed to much company. I can be quite happy by myself, when I am used to things.'

That means you don't want me,' said Oswald; 'but I shall come all the same. What is the book about? You don't mean to say you understand that! What is unconscious cerebration, Cara? Good heavens! how rash I have been. Are you an F.R.S. already, like the rest of your father's friends?'

'I don't know what it means,' said Cara, 'no more than I know about the china. But I read a chapter that first night; it was always something. You see there are very few books in this room. They have been taken away, I suppose. Nobody, except mamma, has ever lived here.'

She gave a little shiver as she spoke, and looked wistfully round. Even in the morning, with the sunshine coming in, how still it was! Oswald thought he would like to break the china, and make a human noise, over the head of the father who was sitting below, making believe to think so much of the memory of his dead wife, and neglecting his living child. The young man had a grudge against the elder one, which gave an edge to his indignation.

'You shall have books,' he said, 'and company too, if you will have me, Cara: that will bring them to their senses,' he added to himself in a half-laughing, half-angry undertone.

What did he mean? Cara had no idea. She laughed too, with a little colour starting to her face, wondering what Aunt Charity would think if she knew that Oswald meant to spend his evenings with her. Cara herself did not see any harm in it, though she felt it was a joke, and could not be.

'You were going out,' she said, 'when you saw me at the window. Had you anything to do? for if you had you must not stay and waste your time with me.'

‘Why should I have anything to do?’

‘I thought young men had,’ said Cara. ‘Of course I don’t know very much about them. I know only the Burchells *well*; they are never allowed to come and talk in the morning. If it is Reginald, he always says he ought to be reading; and Roger, he is of course at work, you know.’

‘I don’t know in the least,’ said Oswald; ‘but I should like to learn. What does this revelation of Rogers and Reginalds mean? I never supposed there were any such persons. I thought that Edward and myself were about the limit of friendship allowed to little Cara, and here is a clan, a tribe. I forewarn you at once that I put myself in opposition to your Reginalds and Rogers. I dislike the gentlemen. I am glad to hear that they have no time to talk in the mornings. I, for my part, have plenty of time.’

‘Oh, you are not likely to know them,’ said Cara, laughing, ‘unless, indeed, Roger comes on Sundays, as he said. They are probably not so rich as you are. Their father is a clergyman, and they have to work. I should like that myself better than doing nothing.’

‘That means,’ said Oswald, with great show of savagery, setting his teeth, ‘that you prefer the said Roger, who must not talk o’ mornings, to me, presumably not required to work? Know, then, young lady, that I have as much need to work as your Roger; more, for I mean to be somebody. If I go in for the bar it is with the intention of being Lord Chancellor; and that wants work—work! such as would take the very breath away from your clergyman’s sons, who probably intend to be mere clergymen, and drop into a fat living.’

‘Roger is an engineer,’ said Cara; ‘he is at the College; he walks about with chains, measuring. I don’t know what is the good of it, but I suppose it is of some good. There are so many things,’ she added, with a sigh, ‘that one is obliged to take for granted. Some day, I suppose, he will have bridges and lighthouses to make. That one can understand—that would be worth doing.’

‘I hate Roger!’ said Oswald. ‘I shall never believe in any lighthouses of his making; there will be a flaw in them. Do you remember the Eddystone, which came down ever so often? Roger’s will tumble down. I know it. And when you have seen it topple over into the sea you shall come and see me tranquilly seated on the woosack, and recant all your errors.’

Upon which they both laughed—not that there was much wit in the suggestion, but they were both young, and the one lighted up the other with gay gleams of possible mirth.

‘However,’ said Oswald, ‘that we may not throw that comparison to too remote a period, where do you think I was going? Talk of me as an idler, if you please. Does this look like idling?’ He took from his pocket a little roll of paper, carefully folded, and breaking open the cover showed her a number of MS. pages, fairly copied out in graduated lines. Cara’s face grew crimson with sudden excitement.

‘*Poetry!*’ she said; but capital letters would scarcely convey all she meant. ‘Oswald, are you a poet?’

He laughed again, which jarred upon her feelings, for poetry (she felt) was not a thing to laugh at. ‘I write verses,’ he said; ‘that is idling—most people call it so, Cara, as well as you.’

‘But I would *never* call it so! Oh, Oswald, if there is anything in the world I care for—Read me some, will you? Oh, do read me something. There is nothing,’ cried Cara, her lips trembling, her eyes expanding, her whole figure swelling with a sigh of feeling, ‘nothing I care for so much. I would rather know a poet than a king!’

Upon this Oswald laughed again, and looked at her with kind admiration. His eyes glowed, but with a brotherly light. ‘You are a little enthusiast,’ he said. ‘I called you *virtuosa*, and you are one in the old-fashioned sense, for that is wider than bric-à-brac. Yes; I sometimes think I might be a poet if I had anyone to inspire me, to keep me away from petty things. I am my mother’s son, Cara. I like to please everybody, and that is not in favour of the highest pursuits. I want a Muse. What if you were born to be my Muse? You shall see some of the things that are printed,’ he added; ‘not these. I am more sure of them when they have attained the reality of print.’

‘Then they are printed?’ Cara’s eyes grew bigger and bigger, her interest grew to the height of enthusiasm. ‘How proud your mother must be, Oswald! I wonder she did not tell me. Does Edward write, too?’

‘Edward!’ cried the other with disdain; ‘a clodhopper; a plodding, steady, respectable fellow, who has passed for the Civil Service. Poetry would be more sadly in his way than it is in mine. Oh, yes, it is sadly in mine. My mother does

not know much; but instead of being enthusiastic she is annoyed with what she does know. 'That is the kind of thing one has to meet with in this world,' he said, with a sigh over his own troubles. 'Sometimes there is one like you—one more generous, more capable of appreciating the things that do not pay—with some people the things that pay are everything. And poetry does not pay, Cara.'

'I don't like you even to say so.'

'Thanks for caring what I say; you have an eye for the ideal. I should like to be set on a pedestal, and to have something better expected from me. That is how men are made, Cara. To know that someone—a creature like yourself—expects something, thinks us capable of something. I am talking sentiment,' he said, with a laugh; 'decidedly you are the Muse I am looking for. On a good pedestal, with plenty of white muslin, there is not a Greek of them all would come up to you.'

'I don't know what you mean, Oswald. Now you are laughing at me.'

'Well, let us laugh,' he said, putting his papers into his pocket again. 'Are you coming to my mother's reception this afternoon? I hear you were there yesterday. What do you think of it? Was old Somerville there with his wig? He is the guardian angel; he comes to see that we all go on as we ought, and that no one goes too far. He does not approve of me. He writes to India about me that I will never be of much use in the world.'

'To India.'

'Yes; all the information about us goes out there. Edward gives satisfaction, but not the rest of us. It is not easy to please people so far off who have not you to judge, but only your actions set down in black and white. Well, I suppose I must go now—my actions don't tell for much: "Went into the house next door, and got a great deal of good from little Cara." That would not count, you see; not even if I put down, "Cheered up little Cara, who was mopish." Might I say that?'

'Yes, indeed; you have cheered me up very much,' said Cara, giving him her hand. Oswald stooped over her a moment, and the girl thought he was going to kiss her, which made her retreat a step backwards, her countenance flaming, and all the shy dignity and quick wrath of her age stirred

into movement. But he only laughed and squeezed her hand, and ran downstairs, his feet ringing young and light through the vacant house. Cara would have gone to the window and looked after him but for that—was it a threatening of a visionary kiss? How silly she was! Of course he did not mean anything of the kind. If he did, it was just as if she had been his sister, and Cara felt that her momentary alarm showed her own silliness, a girl that had never been used to anything. How much an only child lost by being an only child, she reflected gravely, sitting down after he left her by the fire. How pleasant it would have been to have a brother like Oswald. And if he should be a poet! But this excited Cara more when he was talking to her than after he was gone. He did not fall in with her ideas of the poet, who was a being of angelic type to her imagination, not a youth with laughter glancing from his eyes.

That evening Cara sat solitary after dinner, the pretty silver lamp lighted, with its white moon-orb of light upon the table by her; the fire burning just bright enough for company, for it still was not cold. She had said, timidly, 'Shall you come upstairs this evening, papa?' and had received a mildly evasive answer, and she thought about nine o'clock that she heard the hall door shut, just as John came into the room with tea. She thought the man looked at her compassionately, but she would not question him. The room looked very pretty in the fire, light and lamplight, with the little tray gleaming in all its brightness of china and silver, and the little white figure seated by the fire; but it was very lonely. She took up a book a little more interesting than the one which had been her first resource, but presently let it drop on her knee wondering and asking herself would Oswald come? Perhaps he had forgotten; perhaps he had noticed her shrink when he went away, and, meaning nothing by his gesture, did not know why she had retreated from him—perhaps—. But who could tell what might have stopped him? A boy was not like a girl—he might have been asked somewhere. He might have gone to the theatre. Perhaps he had a club, and was there among his friends. All this passed through her head as she sat with the book in her hand, holding it open on her knee. Then she began to read, and forgot for the minute; then suddenly the book dropped again, and she thought, with a sort of childish longing, of what might be going on next door,

just on the other side of the wall, where everything was sure to be so cheerful. If she could only pierce that unkindly wall, and see through ! That made her think of Pyramus and Thisbe, and she smiled, but soon grew grave again. Was this how she was to go on living—lonely all the evening through, her father seeking society somewhere else, she could not tell where. She thought of the drawing-room at the Hill, and her eyes grew wet; how they would miss her there ! and here nobody wanted Cara. Her father, perhaps, might think it right that his child should live under his roof ; but that was all he cared apparently ; and was it to be always thus, and never change ? At seventeen it is so natural to think that everything that is, is unalterable and will never change. Then Cara, with a gulp, and a determination to be as happy as she could in the terrible circumstances, and above all, to shun Oswald, who had not kept his word, opened her book again, and this time got into the story, which had been prefaced by various interludes of philosophising, and remembered no more till nurse came to inquire if she did not mean to go to bed to-night. So the evening did not hang so heavy on her hands as she thought.

Next day Oswald came again, and told her of a forgotten engagement which he had been obliged to keep; and they chatted gaily as before; and he brought her some poems, printed in a magazine, which sounded beautiful when he read them, to her great delight, but did not seem so beautiful when she read them over herself, as she begged she might be allowed to do. After this there was a great deal of intercourse between the two houses, and Cara's life grew brighter. Now and then, it was true, she would be left to spend an evening alone ; but she got other friends, and went to some parties with Mrs. Meredith, Oswald attending them. He was always about; he came and had long private talks with her, reading his verses and appealing to her sympathies and counsel; he walked with her when she went out with his mother; he was always by her side wherever they went. 'I know Edward will cut me out when he comes, so I must make the running now,' he said often, and Cara no longer wondered what making the running meant. She got so used to his presence that it seemed strange when he was not there.

'It's easy to see what that will end in,' said Nurse to John and Cook in the kitchen.

'I wish as one could see what the other would end in,'

Cook replied. But the household watched the two young people with proud delight, going to the window to look at them when they went out, and rejoicing over the handsome couple.

'I always said as our Miss Cara was one as would settle directly,' her faithful attendant said. 'Seventeen! it's too young, that is, for anything.'

'But he haven't got a penny,' said Cook, who was more prudent, 'and he don't do nothing. I'd like a man as could work for me, if I was Miss Cara.'

'I'd like him better if he hadn't no call to work,' said Nurse, with true patrician feeling.

But the chief parties knew nothing of these remarks. They were very cheerful and full of mutual confidences. Oswald confiding to Cara his doubts and difficulties, his aspirations (which were chiefly in verse) and light-hearted anticipations, not going so far as to be called hopes, of sitting one day on the woolsack. Cara, though she had a great respect for Oswald, did not think much about the woolsack. But it was astonishing how she got used to him, how she liked him, and, notwithstanding the occasional dull evenings, how much more variety seemed to have come into her life. Sometimes Mrs. Meredith herself would talk to the girl about her son.

'If he would work more steadily I should be happier, Cara,' she would say; 'and perhaps if he had a strong inducement he would work. He is so clever, and able to do what he likes.'

Cara did not know about this; but she liked his lively company. They were the best of friends; they talked to each other of every foolish thing that comes into the heads of young people; but she had a vague idea that he did not talk to her as the others thought he did. He was not like Roger even; though Roger was no more like him than night was like day. Roger was—different. She could not have told how, and nobody knew of this difference nor spoke to her on the subject. And thus life floated on very pleasantly, with more excitement than had existed in that placid school-girl life at the Hill. Miss Cherry came two or three times on a day's visit to her darling, and observed what was going on and was puzzled; but Aunt Charity had her first attack of bronchitis that year, and it was winter weather, not good for travelling.

'Yes, I think she's happy on the whole,' was Miss Cherry's report to the elder aunt when she went home—which, as may be supposed, was not a clear enough deliverance for Aunt Charity.

'Is the young man in love with her?' said the old lady; 'is she in love with him? James should not be such a fool as to let them be constantly together, unless it is a match that would please him.'

'James is not thinking of anything of the kind,' said Miss Cherry, impatiently. 'James is taken up with his own affairs, and he thinks Cara a little girl still.'

'To be sure he does—that is where men always go wrong,' said Aunt Charity, 'and James will always be a fool to the end of the chapter.'

Cherry winced at this, for she was the model of a good sister, and never had seen any man who was so much her ideal as James—though in some things he was foolish, she was obliged to allow. Perhaps, as Aunt Charity was ill, and the house, as it were, shut up and given over to invalidism for the winter, it was as well that Cara should be away, getting some enjoyment of her young life. Had she been at home it would have been dull for her, for Miss Cherry was in almost constant attendance upon the old lady. Thus things had turned out very well, as they so often do, even when they look least promising. Had Cara been at the Hill, Miss Cherry would not have been so free to devote herself to Aunt Charity, and both the child and the old lady would have suffered. True, Miss Cherry's own life might have had a little additional brightness, but who thought of that? She did not herself, and you may be sure no one else did. It was altogether a fortunate arrangement, as things had turned out, and as for Cara, why, was there not Providence to watch over her, if her father was remiss? Miss Cherry felt that there was something like infidelity in the anxious desire she felt sometimes to go and help Providence in this delicate task.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD PEOPLE.

WHEN Mrs. Beresford died, as has been described, there was a great flutter of talk and private discussion among all who knew her about the particulars of her death. It was 'so sudden at the last,' after giving every indication of turning out a lingering and slow malady, that public curiosity was very greatly excited on the subject. True, the talk was suppressed peremptorily by Mr. Maxwell whenever he came across it, charitably by other less authoritative judges; but it lingered, as was natural, and perhaps the bereaved husband did not have all that fulness of sympathy which generally attends so great a loss. There were many people, indeed, to whom it appeared that such a loss was worse even than a more simple and less mysterious one, and that the survivor was entitled to more instead of less pity; but mysterious circumstances always damp the public sympathy more or less, and people do not like to compromise themselves by kindness which might seem complicity or guilty knowledge if, in the course of time, anything not known at the moment should be found out. Thus James Beresford, though much pitied, did not meet with that warmth of personal sympathy which circumstances like his so often call forth. He was not himself sensible of it indeed, being too miserable to take any notice of what was going on around him; but most of his friends were fully sensible of this fact, and aware that but few overtures of active kindness were made to the melancholy man, whose very abandonment of his home and life made another item in the mysterious indictment against him, of which everybody felt the burden yet nobody knew the rights. It was in these painful circumstances that Mrs. Meredith first formed the link which now associated her with her next door neighbour. The first time he had come home after his wife's death, which was only for a week or two, the kind woman had met him, indeed had laid her simple, tender-hearted plan to meet him—going listlessly into his forsaken house. She had gone up to him, holding out her hand, her features all moved and quivering with feeling. 'Won't you come in and sit with

me in the evening?' she said. 'It is the time one feels one's loneliness most—and my boys are away, Mr. Beresford.' Her soft eyes, as she raised them to him, were full of tears; her look so pitiful, so full of fellow-feeling, that his heart was as much touched for her as hers seemed to be for him. Of all ways of consolation, is there any so effective as that of leading those whom you grieve for to grieve also a little for you, as a fellow-sufferer? His heart was touched. He could not persuade himself to go the very first evening, but he came soon, and when he had come once returned again and again. It was the first new habit he formed after that mournful breaking-up of all his habits. He could not bear much at a time of the dismal place which he still called home; but now and then he was forced to be there, and when he came this new sweet habit gave him a little strength to meet the chaos into which his life otherwise was thrown. Did not Dante, too, get a little comfort from the sweet looks of that sympathising woman who used to glance at him from her window after the lady of his heart was carried by the angels to heaven? There was no wrong to his Annie in that refuge which kindness made for him from the miseries of the world. Eventually it became a matter of course that he should seek that shelter. He went out of his own house and knocked at her door mechanically, and would sit by her, content only to be there, often saying little, getting himself softly healed and soothed, and made capable of taking up again the burden of his life. She was not the same kind of woman as his wife—her habits of mind were different. The variety, the fluctuating charm, the constant movement and change that were in Mrs. Beresford did not exist in this other. She would sit and work by the lamplight, looking up sweetly to answer, but happy to be silent if her companion liked it. She made herself always the second and not the first, responding, not leading; her gift was to divine what was in others, to follow where they went. It was this that made her so popular with all her friends. When they came to her for advice she would give it without that doubt and fear of responsibility which restrains so many people. For why? she had a rule which was infallible, and which made her safe from responsibility, although she was not herself aware how closely she acted upon it. Her infallible guide was a faculty of seeing what people themselves wished, how their own judgments were tending, and what individually

they wanted to do. This she followed sometimes consciously, but often quite unconsciously, as habit led her, and she was never afraid of saying Do this, or Do that. It was one of her great attractions. She might be wise or she might be less than wise, in her decisions, her friends said, but she never shilly-shallied, never was afraid of saying to you with sweet frankness and boldness what she thought it would be good to do.

The consequence of this simple rule was that good advice from Mrs. Meredith's lips was ever so much more popular than good advice had ever been known to be before. It is not a commodity which is generally admired, however admirable it may be; but those whom she advised were not only edified but flattered and brightened. It made themselves feel more wise. It was sweet at once to the giver and to the receiver, and kindled an increased warmth of sympathy between them. Now and then, to be sure, the course of action she recommended might not be a successful one, but is not that the case with all human counsel? This, which was the secret of her power with all her other friends, subjugated James Beresford too. As there is nothing so dear to a man as his own way, so there is no individual so dear as that friend who will recommend and glorify his own way to him, and help him to enjoyment of it. This she did with a gentle patience and constancy which was wonderful. It was natural to her, like all great gifts, and the great charm of it all was that few people suspected the reflection from their own feelings and sentiments which coloured Mrs. Meredith's mind, nor was she at all invariably aware of it herself. Sometimes she believed implicitly in her own advice as the natural growth of her own thoughts and experiences, and believed herself to have an independent judgment. And it is to be supposed that she had opinions and ideas—certainly she had ways of her own, the brightest, and kindest, and most caressing that could be conceived.

This was the secret of those absences which had left Căra so lonely. They had become now the confirmed and constant habit of her father's life. And it would be vain to say that this had been done without remark. While he was at home for a week or two only in a year no one said anything about his frequent visits to the kind neighbour who was not even a widow; but lately he had stayed longer when he came back

to the Square, sometimes remaining a month instead of a week, and now it was understood that he had returned 'for good.' Both Mrs. Meredith and Mr. Beresford had, it may be supposed, friends who took the responsibility of their conduct, and thought it necessary to supervise them in their innocent but unusual intimacy, and these excellent persons were in the attitude of suspended judgment waiting to see what difference Cara's presence would make, and that of Oswald, in the one house and the other. But it had not as yet made any very apparent difference. At nine o'clock, or thereabouts, the door would shut in the one house, and Cook and John would exchange glances; while in the other the bell would tinkle, and the two maids, who divided John's duties between them, would say, 'There is Mr. Beresford, as usual!' and shrug their shoulders. He came in, and they did not take the trouble now even to announce the habitual visitor, who had his special chair and his special corner, as if he belonged to the house. Sometimes the two friends would talk long and much, sometimes they scarcely talked at all. They knew each other like brother and sister, and yet there was between them a delicate separation such as does not exist between relations. In the warm room, softly lighted and friendly, the man who had been wounded found a refuge which was more like the old blessedness of home than anything else could be, and yet was not that blessedness. It did not occur to him that because his daughter had come back to him he was to be banished from this other shelter. Cara's coming, indeed, had scarcely been her father's doing. Many discussions on the point had taken place among all his friends, and Mrs. Meredith had been spurred up by everybody to represent his duty to him. She had done it with a faint sense in her mind that it would affect herself in some undesirable way, and with a certainty that she was departing altogether from her usual rule of argument with the personal wishes of her clients. Mr. Beresford had no personal wish on the subject. He preferred rather that Cara should stay where she was happy. 'If she comes here what can I do for her?' he said. 'My society is not what a girl will like. I cannot take her to the dances and gaieties which will please her.'

'Why not?' Mrs. Meredith had said.

'Why not?' He was petrified by her want of perception. 'What could I do in such places? And she is happy where

she is. She has women about her who know how to manage her. Her coming would derange my life altogether. You, who feel everybody's difficulties, you must feel this. What am I to do with a girl of seventeen? It would be wretched for her, and it could not be any addition to my happiness.'

'Don't you think too much of that,' said Mrs. Meredith, faltering; for indeed this was not at all her way. And it was hard for her to go against those feelings on the part of her companion which, on ordinary occasions, she followed implicitly. Even for herself Cara's presence would complicate the relations generally; but when she saw her duty, she did it, though with faltering. Everybody else had spurred and goaded her up to this duty, and she would not shrink. 'If you are going to settle, you ought to have your child with you.'

'That you should dwell like this upon abstract oughts!' said Mr. Beresford; 'you, who are so full of understanding of personal difficulties. It is not like you. If I feel that Cara is better where she is—happier, more suitably cared for——'

'Still, you know when the father is settled at home his only child should be with him,' Mrs. Meredith reiterated. She was faithful to her *consigne*. If she did not see it, other people did for whom she was the mouthpiece. But it will be perceived that those persons were right who said she was not clever. When she was not following her favourite and congenial pursuit of divining others and reflecting them in her own person, she was reduced to this helpless play of reiteration, and stuck to her one point till everybody was tired of it. Beresford was so impatient that he got up from his chair and began to pace up and down the room.

'There is reason in all things,' he said. 'My house now is emphatically a bachelor house, my servants suit me, my life is arranged as I like it, or at least as I can support it best. Cara would make a revolution in everything. What should I do with her? How should I amuse her? for, of course, she would want amusement. And she is happy, quite happy, where she is; nowhere could she be so well as she is now. My aunt and my sister are wrapt up in her. Yes, yes, of course I am fond of my poor little girl; but what could I do with her? You are always so reasonable—but not here.'

'She should be with her father,' said Mrs. Meredith, sticking to her *consigne*; and of course he thought it was

perversity and opposition, and never divined what it cost her to maintain, against all her habits of mind, the opposite side. When, however, it appeared by the Sunninghill letters that the ladies there took the same view, Mr. Beresford had no more to say. He yielded, but not with a good grace. 'You shall have your will,' he said; 'but Cara will not be happy.' He did not take Oswald Meredith into consideration, or any such strange influence; and as for changing his own habits, how was that to be thought of? Life was hard enough anyhow, with all the alleviations which fate permitted. Did anyone suppose that a girl of seventeen, whom he scarcely knew, could be made into a companion for him by the mere fact that she was his daughter? No; his mornings, which were occupied with what he called hard work; his afternoons, which he spent among his serious friends in his clubs and learned societies; and that evening hour, most refreshing to his soul of any, in which the truest sympathy, the tenderest kindness proved a cordial which kept him alive—which of these, was it to be supposed, he would give up for the society of little Cara? He was very glad to give her all that was wanted for her comfort—a good careful attendant, plenty of dresses and pocket-money, and so forth; but he could not devote himself, surely (who could expect it?), to the society of a child. That anyone should expect this gave him even a little repulsion from, a half-prejudice against her. When she appeared, with that serious, half-disapproving look of hers, and when he realised her, seated upstairs in that drawing-room which he had never entered since her mother's death, among all her mother's relics, recalling to him at once a poignant sense of his loss, and a sharp thrill of conscious pain, in having so far surmounted that loss and put it behind him, the impulse of separation came still more strongly upon him. He shut himself up in his study more determinedly in the morning, and in the evening had more need than ever of the consoling visits which wound him up and kept his moral being in harmony. He had to ask Mrs. Meredith her advice and her opinion, and to ask even her guidance in respect to Cara. Who could tell him so well what to do with a girl as the kindest and best of women? Oswald, who had been at home for some time, did not like these visits so well as his mother did. No one ever suggested to the young man that he was *de trop*; but to be sure there were pauses in their

conversation when this third person was present, and allusions would be made which he did not understand. So that latterly he had been out or in the library downstairs when Mr. Beresford came; very often out, which Mrs. Meredith did not like, but did not know how to prevent, for to be sure she felt the embarrassment also of her son's slight disapproval, and of the restraint his presence produced. Why should he cause a restraint? her boy! but she felt that he did so, and it made her unhappy. It was pleasanter in the former evenings, when Mr. Beresford came home only now and then, and there was neither a Cara nor an Oswald to perplex the simple state of affairs.

'How is she to amuse herself!' Mr. Beresford said to her. 'Yes, yes, I know you will do what you can—when was there ever a time when you did not do what you could and more?—but I cannot take her about, I cannot have anyone in the house to keep her company, and how is she to live there, a young girl, alone?'

'I think Cara will do very well,' said Mrs. Meredith. 'She can always come to me. I have told her so; and the people we know are all beginning to call. She will soon have plenty of friends. People will invite her, and you must go with her here and there.'

'I go with her? You know how I hate going out!'

'Once at least—say only once. You must do that, and then you will find Cara will have her own friends; she will not be a difficulty any longer. I am glad you trust in me to do what I can for her—and Oswald.'

'Of course I trust in you,' he said; 'but it will break up everything. I know it will—after coming to a kind of calm, after feeling that I can settle down again, and that life is not utterly distasteful to me—you will not wonder that I should be frightened for everything. And you, who have done so much for me.'

'I have not done anything,' said Mrs. Meredith, looking up smiling from her book.

'You say so; but it is you who have done everything; and if I am to be plucked from my refuge now, and pitched forth upon the world—I believe I am a coward. I shrink from mere outside intercourse, from being knocked up against one and another, and shut out from what I prize most.'

'How can that be?' she said; 'you get fretful, you men,

when everything does not go as you wish. Have a little patience. When Oswald came home, it seemed at first, as if he, dear boy, was going to upset all my habits; but it was a vain fear. The first little strangeness is over, and he has settled down, and we are happy—happier than ever. It will be the same with Cara and you.'

Beresford gave a half-groan of dissent. I fear Mrs. Meredith saw that it had a double meaning, and that it expressed a certain impatience of her son as well as of his daughter; but this was one of the things which she would not see.

'Yes,' she said, with a little nod of her head, 'I will answer for it, it will be just the same with Cara and you.'

Mr. Beresford gave a little snort at this of absolute dissatisfaction. 'I don't like changes of any kind,' he said; 'when we have got to be tolerably well in this dismal world, why not be content with it, and stop there! *Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*. How true that is! and yet what can be better than well? I dislike changes, and this almost more than any other. I foresee it will bring me a thousand troubles—not to you, I hope,' he said, his voice slightly faltering; 'it would be unbearable indeed if it brought any trouble to you.'

'Cara cannot bring any trouble to me,' she said brightly; 'of that I am sure enough: you are making a ghost of the dearest child. By-and-by you will see how sweet she is and how good.'

'All girls have a way of being sweet and good,' he said cynically, which was a mood quite uncongenial to him and out of his way.

'That is not like you,' said Mrs. Meredith.

He knew it was not. The thought had passed through his own mind that the saying was ungenerous and unworthy of him, and unworthy of utterance in her presence. What could any man be worth who could utter one of those foolish stock taunts against women in any stage of life, before a woman who was to him the queen of friends, the essence of everything consolatory and sweet. 'You are always right,' he replied hastily, 'and I am wrong, as a matter of course. I am out of sorts. I had but just caught hold of life again and found it practicable, and here seems something that may unsettle all; but I am wrong, it is almost certain, and you must be right.'

‘That is a delightful sentiment—for me; but I am sure of my ground about Cara. Oh, quite sure!’ she said, ‘as sure—as I am of my own boys.’

Beresford did not say anything, but he breathed a short impatient sigh. Her boys were all very well at a distance. When they had been absent he had been fond of them, and had shared in the sentiment expressed by all Mrs. Meredith’s friends, of regret for their absence; but when a small share even of a woman’s company has become one of your daily comforts it is difficult not to find her grown-up son in your way. He reflected upon this as he shook hands with her, and went back to his dwelling-place next door with a consciousness of impatience which was quite unjustifiable. To be sure her grown-up son had a right to her which nothing could gainsay, and was, in a sort of a way, master of the house under her, and might even have a kind of right to show certain mild objections and dislikes to special visitors. Mr. Beresford could not deny these privileges of a son; but they galled him, and there was in his mind an unexpressed irritation against those troublesome members of the new generation who would thrust themselves in the way of their elders, and tread upon their heels perpetually. Children were much pleasanter than these grown-up young people. He did not see the use of them. Cara, for instance, though it was supposed she was to keep house for her father, of what use was she in the house? Cook (naturally) knew a hundred times more than she did, and kept everything going as on wheels. As for Oswald Meredith, who had been a sprightly and delightful boy, what was he now?—an idle young man about town, quite beyond his mother’s management; doing nothing, probably good for nothing, idling away the best years of his life. Why did not she send him to India, as he was doing so little here? What an ease to everybody concerned that would be! He thought of it in the most philosophical way, as good for everybody, best for the young man—a relief to his mother’s anxieties, a thing which his best friends must desire. What a pity that it could not be done at once! But it would scarcely be good policy on his part to suggest it to Oswald’s mother. She might think he had other motives; and what motive could he have except to promote the welfare of the son of such a kind friend?

CHAPTER XV.

ROGER.

ROGER BURCHELL had set his mind steadily, from the moment of Cara's translation to her father's house, upon spending those Sundays, which he had hitherto passed at home, with his aunt at Notting Hill. But the rest of the world has a way of throwing obstacles in the path of heroes of twenty in a quite incredible and heartless manner. It was not that the authorities at the Rectory made any serious objections. There was so many of them that one was not missed—and Roger was not one of the more useful members of the family. He had no voice, for one thing, and therefore was useless in church; and he declined Sunday-school work, and was disposed to be noisy, and disturbed the attention of the little ones; therefore he could be dispensed with at home, and nobody cared to interfere with his inclinations. Neither had the aunt at Notting Hill any objection to Roger—he was a friendly boy, willing to take a quiet walk, ready to be kind to those who were kind to him—and to have somebody to share her solitary Sunday's dinner, and make her feel like other people when she went to church, was pleasant to her. He was a boy who never would want to shirk morning church, or keep the servants from it, to get him a late breakfast, like so many young men. But accident, not evil intention, came in Roger's way. His aunt fell ill, and then something went wrong at the Engineering College, and leave was withheld—entirely by caprice or mistake, for Roger of course was sure of being entirely innocent, as such youthful sufferers generally are. The upshot was, that his first Sunday in London did not really occur until Cara had been a whole month in her new home. How he chafed and fretted under this delay it is unnecessary to tell. It seemed to him an age since that October afternoon when the sun was so warm on the Hill, and Cara stood by his side looking over the country in its autumn tints, and watching the shadows fly and the lights gleam over St. George's. What a long time it was! the mellow autumn had stolen away into the fogs of winter; November is but the next month, yet what a difference there

is between its clammy chills, and the thick air that stifles and chokes you, and that warmth and sunny glow with which red-breasted October sings the fall of the leaves and the gathering-in of the fruit! And in that time how much might have happened. Had it been dreary for her all by herself in London, separated from her friends? or had she found new people to keep her cheerful, and forgotten the friends of her youth? These were the questions the lad asked himself as he went up to town from Berkshire, on the evening of Saturday, the 25th of November. All that he had heard of since she left had been from a letter which Miss Cherry had read to his sister Agnes, and from which it appeared that Cara felt London lonely, and regretted her friends in the country. 'How I wish I could have a peep at all of you or any of you!' she had said. Agnes had been pleased with the expression, and so was he. 'All of us or any of us,' he said to himself for the hundredth time as the train flew over the rain-sodden country. He thought, with a thrill at his heart, that her face would light up, as he had seen it do, and she would be glad to see him. She would put into his that small hand, that seemed to melt in his grasp like a flake of snow; and perhaps there would come upon her cheek that faint crimson, which only things very pleasant brought there—the reflection of a sweet excitement. What an era that would be for Roger! he dreamt it out moment by moment, till he almost felt that it had occurred. Sometimes a dream of the other kind would start across him—a horrible fancy that he would find her happy among others, making new friends, forgetting the old; but this was too painful to be encouraged. He thought the train as slow as an old hackney coach, when at last, after all these delays, he got away and found himself actually on the road to London and to her, and thought of a story he had heard of someone in hot haste, as he was, who had jumped out of his carriage and pushed it on behind to arrive the sooner. Roger felt disposed to do so, though his train was an express, and though he knew he could not go to the Square that evening to see her. But he was so much nearer her when he got to Notting Hill. She was on one side of the Park and he on the other. Next day he would walk across, through all the Sunday people, through the yellow fog, under the bare-branched trees, and knock at her door. There was still a moment of suspense, still a long wintry night—and then!

His aunt thought very well of the young man when he got to Notting Hill. She was his mother's sister, a widow, and without children, and Roger had been named after her husband, the late Captain Brandon, whose portrait hung over her mantelpiece, and whose memory was her pride. She thought her nephew was like her side of the house, not 'those Burchells,' and felt a thrill of pride as he came in, tall and strong, in his red-brown hair and budding moustache, with a touch of autumn colour about him in the heavy despondency of the November day.

'What weather!' she said, 'what weather, Roger! I daresay it is a little better in the country; but we have nothing else to expect in November, when the wind blows up the smoke out of the city.'

Roger hastened to assure her that the country was a great deal worse, that the river was like a big, dismal ditch, full of mists and rains, and that town, with its cheerful lights and cheerful company, was the only place. Aunt Mary let herself be persuaded. She gave him a nice little dish of cutlets with his tea. She asked him questions about his mother and sister, and whether his papa's opinions were not getting modified by experience and by the course of events.

'Hasn't he learnt to take warning by all this Romanising?' she asked, and shook her head at Roger's doubtful reply. She differed so much in ecclesiastical opinion from her brother-in-law, that she very seldom went to the Rectory. But she was glad to hear all about her godchild, little Mary, and how Philip was getting on at Cambridge. And how pleasant it was to have someone to talk to, instead of sitting all alone and melancholy, thinking, or reading the newspaper. She made much of Roger, and told him he would always be welcome; he was to come as often as he pleased.

'I shall see her to-morrow,' Roger said to himself, as he laid his head upon his pillow. The thought did not stop him from sleeping; why should it? but it suggested a string of dreams, some of which were terribly tantalising. He was just putting out his hand to take hers, just about to hear the answer to some momentous question, when he would wake suddenly and lose it all; but still even the disappointment only awakened him to the fact that he was to see her to-morrow; he was to see her to-morrow; nay, to-day, though this yellow glimmer did not look much like daylight. He got up the moment he was

called, and dressed with much pains and care—too much care. When his toilet was careless Roger looked, as he was, a gentleman; but when he took extra pains, a Sunday look crept about him, a certain stiffness, as of a man occupying clothes to which he was unaccustomed. His frock-coat—it was his first—was uglier and squarer than even frock-coats generally are, his hat looked higher, his gloves a terrible bondage. Poor boy! but for Cara he never would have had that frock-coat; thus to look our best we look our worst, and evil becomes our good. But his aunt was much pleased with his appearance when he went to church with her, and thought his dress just what every gentleman ought to wear on Sunday.

‘But your gloves are too tight, my dear,’ she said.

Roger thought everything was tight, and was in twenty minds to abandon his fine clothes and put on the rough morning suit he had come in; but the frock-coat carried the day. He could not eat at Mrs. Brandon’s early dinner. She was quite unhappy about him, and begged him not to stand on ceremony, but to tell her frankly if it was not to his mind. ‘For if you are going to spend your Sundays with me it is just as easy to buy one thing as another,’ Aunt Mary said, good, kind, deceived woman. She was very glad he should take a walk afterwards, hoping it would do him good.

‘And I think perhaps I had better call at the Square and see Miss Beresford. Her aunt is sure to ask me when I see her,’ he said.

‘Do, my dear,’ said the unsuspecting woman. And he set off across the park. It was damp enough and foggy enough to quench any man’s courage. The Sunday people, who were out in spite of all disadvantages, were blue, half with the cold and half with the colour of the pitiless day. A few old ladies in close broughams took their constitutional drive slowly round and round. What pleasure could they find in it? still, as it is the ordinance of heaven that there should be old ladies as well as young men of twenty, it was a good thing they had comfortable broughams to drive about in; and they had been young in their time, Roger supposed, feeling it hard upon everybody not to have the expectations, the hopes, that made his own heart beat. How it beat and thumped against his breast! He was almost sorry, though he was glad, when the walk was over and the tall roofs of the

houses in the Square overshadowed him. His heart jumped higher still, though he thought it had been incapable of more, when he got to the house. 'Doors where my heart was used to beat.' He did not know any poetry to speak of, and these words did not come to him. He felt that she must be glad to see him, this dull, damp Sunday afternoon, the very time when heaven and earth stood still, when there was nothing to amuse or occupy the languid mind. No doubt she and her father would be sitting together, suppressing two mutual yawns, reading two dull books; or, oh, blessed chance! perhaps her father would have retired to his library, and Cara would be alone. He pictured this to himself—a silent room, a Sunday solitude, a little drooping figure by the chimney-corner, brightening up at sight of a well-known face—when the drawing-room door opened before him, and his dream exploded like a bubble, and with a shock of self-derision and disappointment more bitter than honest Roger had ever felt in all his simple life before. There were several people in the room, but naturally Roger's glance sought out the only one he was interested in, the only one he knew in the little company. She was standing in front of one of the windows, the pale wintry light behind making a silhouette of her pretty figure, and the fine lines of her profile; but curiously enough, it was not she, after the first glance, who attracted Roger's gaze, but the other figure which stood beside her, close to her, young, and friendly, in all the confidence of intimacy. It was Oswald Meredith who was holding a book in which he was showing Cara something—she, holding the corner of it with one hand, drew it down to her level, and with a raised finger of the other seemed to check what he was saying. They made the prettiest group; another young man, sitting at the table, gazing at the pair, thought so too, with an envious sentiment, not so strong or so bitter as Roger's, but enough to swear by. Oswald had all the luck, this young fellow was saying to himself: little Cara, too! Behind was Mrs. Meredith, sitting by the fire, and Mr. Beresford, gloomy and sombre, standing by her. It was the first time he had been in this room, and the visit had been made expressly for the purpose of dragging him into it. He stood near his friend, looking down, sometimes looking at her, but otherwise never raising his eyes. This, however, was a side scene altogether uninteresting to Roger. What was it to him what these two elder people might be feeling or thinking?

All that he could see was Cara and 'that fellow,' who presumed to be there, standing by her side, occupying her attention. And how interested she looked! more than in all the years they had known each other she had ever looked for him.

Cara started at the sound of his name. 'Mr. Burchell? oh, something must be wrong at home!' she cried; then, turning round suddenly, stopped with a nervous laugh of relief. 'Oh, it is only Roger! what a fright you gave me! I thought it must be your father, and that Aunt Charity was ill. Papa, this is Roger Burchell, from the Rectory. You remember, he said he would come and see me. But, Roger, I thought you were coming directly, and it is quite a long time now since I left home.'

'I could not come sooner,' he said, comforted by this. 'I came as soon as ever I could. My aunt was ill and could not have me; and then there was some trouble at the College,' he added, hurriedly, feeling himself to be getting too explanatory. Cara had given him her hand; she had pointed to a chair near where she was standing; she had given up the book which Oswald now held, and over which he was looking, half-amused, at the new-comer. Roger was as much occupied by him, with hot instinct of rivalry, as he was with Cara herself, who was the goddess of his thoughts; and how the plain young engineer, in his stiff frock-coat, despised the handsome young man about town, so easy and so much at home! with a virulence of contempt which no one could have thought to be in Roger. 'Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?' he was tempted to say, making up to him straight before the other had time to open his lips. But of course, being in civilised society, Roger did not dare to obey his impulse, though it stirred him to the heart.

'You don't introduce us to your friend, Cara,' said Oswald, smiling, in an undertone.

The fellow called her Cara! Was it all settled, then, and beyond hope, in four short weeks? 'Oh, what a fool Roger had been to allow himself to be kept away!

'Mr. Roger Burchell—Mr. Meredith—Mr. Edward Meredith,' said Cara, with a slight evanescent blush. 'Roger is almost as old a friend at the Hill as you are at the Square. We have all been children together;' and then there was a pause which poor little Cara, not used to keeping such hostile

elements in harmony, did not know how to manage. She asked timidly if he had been at the Hill—if he had seen——?

‘I came direct from the College last night,’ he said; and poor Roger could not keep a little flavour of bitterness out of his tone, as who should say, ‘A pretty fool I was to come at all!’

‘The—College?’ said Oswald, in his half-laughing tone.

‘I mean only the Scientific College, not anything to do with a University,’ said Roger, defiant in spite of himself. ‘I am an engineer—a working man’—and though he said this as a piece of bravado, poor fellow! it is inconceivable how Sundayish, how *endimanché*, how much like a real working man in unused best raiment, he felt in his frock-coat.

‘Oh, tell me about that!’ said Mrs. Meredith, coming forward; ‘it is just what I want to know. Mr. Roger Burchell, did you say, Cara? I think I used to know your mother. I have seen her with Miss Cherry Beresford? Yes; I thought it must be the same. Do you know I have a particular reason for wishing to hear about your College? One of my friends wants to send his son there if he can get in. Will you tell me about it? I know you want to talk to Cara——’

‘Oh, no; not if she is engaged,’ said Roger, and blushed hot with excessive youthful shame when he had made this foolish speech.

‘She will not be engaged long, for we are going presently,’ said the smiling gracious woman, who began to exercise her usual charm upon the angry lad in spite of himself. She drew a chair near to the spot where he still stood defiant. ‘I shall not keep you long,’ she said; and what could Roger do but sit down, though so much against his will, and allow himself to be questioned?

‘Your friend from the country is impatient of your other friends,’ said Oswald, closing the book which he held out to Cara, and marking the place as he gave it to her. ‘Do you want to get rid of us as much as he does?’

‘He does not want to get rid of anyone, but he does not understand—society,’ said Cara, in the same undertone. Roger could not hear what it was, but he felt sure they were talking of him, though he did his best to listen to Mrs. Meredith’s questions. Then the other one rose, who was not so handsome as Oswald, and went to her other side, completely shutting her out from the eyes of the poor fellow who had

come so far, and taken so much trouble to see her. The College—what did he care for the College! about which the soft-voiced stranger was questioning him. He made her vague broken answers, and turned round undisguisedly, poor fellow! to where Cara stood; yet all he could see of her was the skirt of her blue dress from the other side of Edward Meredith, whose head, leaning forward, came between Roger and the girl on whom his heart was set.

‘Mr. Burchell, Cara and her father are dining with my boys and me. Edward is only with me for a few hours; he is going away by the last train. Will not you come, too, and join us? Then Cara can see a little more of you. Do you stay in town to-night?’

Two impulses struggled in Roger’s mind—to refuse disdainfully, or to accept gratefully. In the first case he would have said he had dined already, making a little brag of his aunt’s early hours—in the second—a calculation passed very quickly through his mind, so quick that it was concluded almost before Mrs. Meredith’s invitation.

‘I could,’ he said, faltering; ‘or, perhaps, if your son is going I might go, too, which would be best——’

‘Very well, then, it is a bargain,’ she said, putting out her hand with a delightful smile. He felt how warm and sweet it was, even though he was trying at the moment to see Cara. This was the kind of mother these fellows had, and Cara living next door! Surely all the luck seems to be centred on some people; others have no chance against them. He stood by while Mrs. Meredith got up, drawing her sons with her. ‘Come, boys, you can carry on your talk later,’ she said. ‘Good-by for the moment, Cara mia.’ Then she turned to Mr. Beresford, who stood gloomily, with his eyes bent on the fire. ‘You are not sorry you have broken the spell?’ she said, with a voice which she kept for him alone, or so at least he thought.

He gave his shoulders a hasty shrug. ‘We can talk of that later. I am going to see you to the door,’ he said, giving her his arm. The boys lingered. Oswald was patting his book affectionately with one hand. It was Edward who was ‘making the running’ now.

‘You are still coming to dine, Cara?’ he said. ‘Don’t turn me off for this friend. He cannot be such an old friend as I am; and I have only a few hours——’

'So has he,' said Cara; 'and he told me he was coming. What am I to do?'

'There are three courses that you can pursue,' said Oswald. 'Leave him, as Ned recommends; stay with him, as I certainly don't recommend; or bring him with you. And which of these, Cara, you may choose will be a lesson as to your opinion of us. But you can't stay with him; that would be a slight to my mother, and your father would not allow it. The compromise would be to bring him.'

'Oh, how can I do that, unless Mrs. Meredith told me to do it? No; perhaps he will go away of himself—perhaps——'

'Poor wretch! he looks unhappy enough,' said Edward, with a sympathy of fellow-feeling. Oswald laughed. The misery and offence in the new-comer's face was only amusing to him.

'Cara,' he said, 'if you are going to begin offensive warfare, and to flaunt young men from the country in our faces, I for one will rebel. It is not fair to us; we were not prepared for anything of the sort.'

'My mother is calling us,' said Edward, impatiently. Two or three times before his brother had irritated him to-day. Either he was in a very irritable mood, or Oswald was more provoking than usual. 'I have only a few hours,' he continued, aggrieved, in a low tone, 'and I have scarcely spoken to you, Cara; and it was you and I who used to be the closest friends. Don't you remember? Oswald can see you when he pleases; I have only one day. You won't disappoint us, will you? I wish you'd go'—this was to his brother—'I'll follow. There are some things I want to speak to Cara about, and you have taken her up all the afternoon with your poetry. Yes, yes; I see, there is *him* behind; but, Cara, look here, you won't be persuaded to stay away to-night?'

'Not if I can help it,' said the girl, who was too much embarrassed by this first social difficulty to feel the flattery involved. She turned to Roger, when the others went downstairs, with a somewhat disturbed and tremulous smile.

'They are our next-door neighbours, and they are very kind,' she said. 'Mrs. Meredith is so good to me; as kind as if she were a relation' (this was all Cara knew of relationships). 'I don't know what I should do without her; and I have known the boys all my life. Roger, won't you sit down? I am so sorry to have been taken up like this the very moment you came.'

‘But if they live next door, and you know them so well, I daresay you are very often taken up like this,’ said Roger, ‘and that will be hard upon your country friends. And I think,’ he added, taking courage as he found that the door remained closed, and that not even her father (estimable man!) came back, that we have a better claim than they have; for you were only a child when you came to the Hill, and you have grown up there.’

‘I like all my old friends,’ said Cara, evasively. ‘Some are—I mean they differ—one likes them for different things.’

The poor boy leaped to the worse interpretation of this, which, indeed, was not very far from the true one. ‘Some are poorer and not so fine as others,’ he said; ‘but, perhaps, Cara, the rough ones, the homely ones, those you despise, are the most true.’

‘I don’t despise anyone,’ she said, turning away, and taking up Oswald Meredith’s book.

By Jove! even when he was gone was ‘that fellow’ to have the best of it with his confounded book? Roger’s heart swelled; and then he felt that expediency was very much to be thought of, and that when a man could not have all he wanted it was wise to put up with what he could get.

‘Cara, don’t be angry with me,’ he said. ‘I shall like your friends, too, if—if you wish me. The lady is very nice and kind, as you say. She has asked me to go there to dinner, too.’

‘You!’ Cara said, with (he thought) a gleam of annoyance. Roger jumped up, wild with rage and jealousy, but then he sat down again, which was certainly the best thing for him to do.

CHAPTER XVI.

SUNDAY EVENING.

To sit down in your morning clothes, painfully conscious of a blue tie with a pin it, at a decorous dinner-table with three men in correct evening dress, and two ladies—not indeed bare-shouldered according to ancient use, but yet arrayed in all the niceties of that demi-toilette which is the despair of the vulgar—is in itself no small trial to a sensitive and thin-skinned

youth. Roger Burchell had not been able to resist the spell which Mrs. Meredith exercised upon everybody who came near her, nor had he been able to count the cost of that evening spent in Cara's society, and to strike a balance between the pain it would cause him and the pleasure to be procured from it. He was not calm enough to do this. He had not thought of any pain involved, but snatched at the chance of carrying out his hopes and spending the evening in her society without thinking of any results. To be sure, instinctive dislike and repugnance had moved him at the first sight of the two young men. What did they want here? What had Cara to do with them? But that was all; and he had not realised how hard it would be to sit by and see these natural enemies so much nearer and more intimate with Cara than himself, linked to her by ties even of older friendship than he could boast of, poor fellow. All this was unthought-of misery. It was true that after the Merediths went away in the short interval before dinner he had half-an-hour with Cara by herself—but she asked him questions about his aunt and about his little sisters, showing no interest in himself, and at last begged him to excuse her, as she must get ready for dinner. Even then he did not know how dark his fate was to be; but he could not get ready for dinner. He looked at himself in the glass, and at his blue tie which he had thought so well of in the morning. The best that anyone could say for poor Roger was that he looked like a respectable mechanic in his Sunday costume, and a consciousness of this fact impressed itself upon his own mind for the first time. Yes—the long glass in the glimmering half-lighted drawing-room showed him his own image as no glass at home had ever done—like an engineer in his Sunday clothes, one of his practical 'mates' in the workshop, who showed him how to make boilers and screws, and asked him for beer—exactly like one of them. While this latter thought was in his mind, Cara came softly into the room in her white dress, the most perfect dainty creature, tearing poor Roger's heart in two. How unlike she was to himself in his blue tie! he felt as if he could never leave her, and yet wished himself with his aunt in Notting Hill; for what had he to do here?

The dinner was not, perhaps, the abundant meal which Roger had been used to see on occasions when there was company. There was no huge joint, no pair of visible fowls,

with a tongue placed between them, which was his mother's grand dish, but a succession of small matters handed round, which Roger tried to despise. He tried hard to despise everything—the over-dress (as he felt it to be), the flowers on the dainty table, the ready flow of talk. How could these fellows find so much to say? He could have talked to Cara (perhaps) had they been alone together; but to chatter as these fellows did—he could as soon fly, he said to himself. There were no decorous silences, no long pauses, such as he had been used to, but a constant, easy flow of this, which, no doubt, they called conversation! It could not be said that he himself added much to it. Now and then, after considerable pondering, he would fire off a remark, but this seldom happened till after the subject had been dismissed by the others, and when it required a polite effort on their parts to make out what he meant; and he discovered this with a hot blush of shame as soon as his little speech was made. The only comfort he had was that Cara did not talk very much either; but then she listened with pleased looks while the Meredith family chattered. How they all chattered, mother and sons! Roger did not think they could be quite—he did not know what word to use—not quite—. Perfectly respectable people did not, so far as he knew, indulge in such streams of conversation. He felt there was something wrong in so much talk.

And when they went upstairs after dinner it was still worse. Mr. Beresford and the others did not sit over their wine, which Roger would have thought the best thing possible had he found themselves satisfactory; but as this was not the case, and he was sure that the only object of the young Merediths in not staying below and drinking themselves stupid was anxiety to be with Cara, too, he took their quick move as another sign of depravity. It was new-fashioned, it was un-English, it was almost wicked. He followed upstairs with a protest in his soul. Cara and Mrs. Meredith were sitting together over the fire. They drew a little apart as the others came in, and Mr. Beresford placed himself by the elder lady, and Oswald by Cara. So! Roger said to himself, that was the habitual way in which they arranged themselves—nothing could be more clear; flirtation, nothing but flirtation, between the old people and between the young people. It was more than wrong, it was monstrous. He supposed such things did happen in London society, where everything that was bad

happened; but to think of poor little, innocent Cara being thrown into the midst of such a set of people! Roger could scarcely command his feelings. After standing about behind-backs for a time with Edward, who, to tell the truth, seemed a little 'out of it' too, Roger's sense of horror forced him forward to the front of the fire, where he suddenly placed himself with that temerity of enraged shyness which is bolder than assurance. At all events, there could be no particular conversation between Oswald and Cara while he stood there.

This made a little break in the low-voiced talk. Mrs. Meredith, who sat on the other side in a low chair, with a little table by her elbow, on which stood a lamp, turned from Mr. Beresford to look at him. He could not easily think ill of this soft-smiling lady; but he made an effort, and succeeded even in this.

'Are you at the University, Mr. Burchell?' she said, smiling upon him.

There was some work lying upon her little table. He jumped at this evidence of Sabbath-breaking and profanity with inward satisfaction as a sign that she must be bad too.

'No,' he said, with unnecessary explanatoriness, 'I am not so lucky. I have got my own way to make in the world. I have to start work at once. I was afraid you would give me credit for more than I deserved. My brother's at Cambridge, for he is going into the Church; but as for me, I've got my own way to make in the world.'

'So have the rest of us,' said Oswald. 'You must not take such high ground of superiority. We have all got our own way to make in the world.'

'That is all very well,' said Roger, determined to separate himself from all resemblance to his companions; 'but I'm a rough, practical man, not in your elegant way. I'm an engineer—I am going to India, I suppose—'

'And so, I suppose, am I,' said Edward, looking, as Roger thought, towards Cara with a sigh. 'But I am not very fond of the idea. I hope you like it better than I do?'

'Nobody will ask my opinion whether I like it or not,' said Roger. He caught a glimpse of himself at this moment in a mirror opposite, and his blue tie seemed to glare at him and force him on. 'I shall have to do whatever will make me independent soonest. They've got a number of children at home.'

'It is very fine to be independent,' said Mrs. Meredith, in

her soft way; 'or at least so all you boys think. You like to be able to do what you please without reference to your fathers and mothers.' She looked at her own boys as she spoke, not at Roger, and even this added to his exasperation. How different they were with this soft mother, whose very look was a caress, from what he was, with all the children at home, and a father and mother whom numbers made impartial, and who had few prejudices in Roger's favour. Poor boy, his heart swelled with a sense of his disadvantages; and naturally he did all he could to make them show the more.

'Independence don't mean that sort of thing to me,' he said; 'it is taking the expense off my father, that's what they think of. I must get my own living as soon as I can, that is what it means; and if it is not a very good living so much the worse for me. No one else will pay much attention. Whether one does what one likes or does what one must, makes all the difference——'

'That is spoken like a philosopher,' said Mr. Beresford, who had been looking at the young bear thus making uncouth noises of self-assertion with distasteful amusement; 'but you must recollect that very few of us have the privilege of doing what we like. When we get this advantage, it is generally when we cease to prize it, when we should be thankful to go back to the *must*, and be under force again.'

Under other circumstances Roger could only have been respectful of Cara's father, but he was otherwise inspired now, and ready to defy even that most privileged of mortals. 'So you people say, sir,' he said, with a rough show of respect, 'who have things all your own way. So long as you don't know what it is to be under force of circumstances, I suppose it seems rather fine than otherwise to do your duty though you don't like it. I have thought that myself now and again. It looks self-denying and all that; but if it's true, as people say, that you do best what you like best, I don't see the good of self-denial in that way.'

'I agree with Mr. Burchell,' said Oswald; 'but I go further. What is the good of self-denial in any way? It always involves unkindness to somebody. Nature gives you a beautiful day, for instance, and you turn your back upon her and work. What could be more unkind and ungrateful? Or Cara says to me, "Come out and play croquet in the Square——,"'

'I hate croquet,' cried Cara, indignantly. 'I never did such a thing in my life; besides, it is winter, and I could not play croquet if I liked it ever so much.'

'What does it matter about details? I use the word croquet as a symbol—or my mother requires my attendance upon her somewhere. Then the rest of the world turn round and call me idle! Self-denial is a disagreeable quality, Cara. Let us avoid it. At the best it is only extracting merit out of necessity, for nobody denies himself except when he's obliged to do so.'

'Sybarite!' said Mrs. Meredith, shaking her head at her son; and then she turned to talk to Mr. Beresford, and the four young people were left to themselves.

'Sit down, Roger,' said Cara; 'why should you stand up there as if you were defying the world. You are all quite wrong. It is not self-denial to do what you are forced to do. When you give up anything of your own free will because it is right, then perhaps——'

'Only perhaps, Cara? Don't take away the little satisfaction one has in doing a thing that is disagreeable. Look here,' said Edward, suddenly seating himself in the vacant place by her which Roger had neglected to take, 'going to India is very disagreeable to me. I think I could do just as well at home. My feeling is all against it; I might, perhaps, make more money there, but money is not everything. There is no necessity that I can see, one way or another—but my mother wishes it—that is to say, my mother thinks my father would like it——'

Roger looked quickly at Mrs. Meredith. Is there a father? he said to himself, with a mental whistle of astonishment, to which he dared not give audible utterance. 'Whew!' and the astute young man immediately leaped to the conviction that here was something unquestionably wrong.

'I thought — it was Oswald — whom Mr. Meredith wanted——'

Oswald laughed. 'Have you not found out, Cara, that Oswald is an individual?' he said. 'If Ned likes to be knocked about the world according to other people's fancies, that is his affair. I don't. Yes, it was Oswald that was wanted; but I never was a man for competitive examinations, my ideas don't run in that channel, so I dropped my mantle upon my brother. Oh, he will have compensation; he will

be a Member of Council while I am only a briefless barrister. He will move princes about like chessmen while I have no influence with anyone but a stray editor. Ned will be the great man of the family—what, you don't approve of me! You would rather Ned stayed at home than I?'

Cara had given him a very young girl's most emphatic sign of disapproval. She turned her shoulder upon him, and averted her head. Poor Roger looked on with a burning heart, seeing the two brothers, one on each side of her, contending, as it seemed, for her approbation. The fact that there were two seemed to shut him out more and more. He was indignant, disappointed, wounded. He said to himself in his heart every ill thing he could think of against this strange house. First, the Sunday dinner-party—even though he had himself condoned it by becoming one of the guests; second, the work left on the table, which he felt sure the mistress of the house was quite capable of taking up, although restrained by his presence from actually doing so. Then the separation of the family—the father in India, the mother here. What a house for Cara to be thrown into! What an example for her! A woman who lived apart from her husband and yet asked people to dinner could not be a proper woman to have the charge of Cara. Of course, she was just the sort of person to encourage a girl in flirting, to put evil into her head. These were the thoughts that kept burning and scorching the brain of poor Roger as he stood before the fire in this strange house, the people on either side of him so much engaged with each other, and he so completely left out. Why did he come here to make himself unhappy? Why build such foolish hopes upon this day? His aunt at Notting Hill would have been a much better companion, a great deal kinder, and she would be wondering now what had become of him, or thinking, perhaps, that he was enjoying himself! Strange enjoyment! He made a distinct pause in his thoughts to realise her, but he made no sort of movement to go away, which was the only thing he could do to relieve her anxiety. She would wonder if he meant to come back; if he was going to stay all night; or if he had gone off straight from his friend's house to catch the train. There were not all the usual trains on Sunday nights, and this would perplex her, poor lady, still more. All this passed through his mind, and he was very uncomfortable. Yet he made no attempt to go away.

‘Roger,’ said Cara, getting up suddenly, for she felt herself embarrassed on her side, and was glad of a way of escape, ‘are you going back to the College to-night?’

Her question chimed in with his thoughts, but he did not reply in the way that would have seemed most in keeping with those thoughts. ‘It does not matter,’ he said; ‘I think I shall go down by the first train to-morrow.’ As soon as he felt her soft eyes upon him the foolish young fellow thought that all must go well.

‘If I were you I would go to-night,’ she said; ‘you will be obliged to get up so early, and it is so dark in the mornings. You never used to like getting up——.’ Roger felt the light and the warmth coming back to him, flooding him round and round.

‘I don’t mind now,’ he said. ‘It does not matter. To-night is better than to-morrow,’ which was an incoherent utterance that Cara could not understand.

‘Have you been enjoying it, then? I was afraid you did not like them,’ said Cara, very low, so that no one could hear but himself. Then Roger glowed with sudden kindness, and felt ready to embrace the whole party.

‘It is only my bad manners,’ he said. ‘Oh, Cara, have I been making myself disagreeable? You know they always go on at me about my manners at home.’

‘Your manners are well enough,’ she said, with a serious look. ‘I thought you were not—pleased. Come, then, and sit down, and talk with the rest; they are more like you than they are like me. You ought to be friends, for you are all—boys. A girl has less to say to them. And then Edward is going to India, too——’

‘I would rather talk to you; but I will do whatever you like, Cara.’

‘Yes; but do it, then,’ she said with a smile, and, leaving him there she went over to the other side of the fire, and sat down under the shadow of Mrs. Meredith, from whence she looked across placidly at the three whom she had abandoned. Mrs. Meredith smiled upon Cara, putting out her hand caressingly to lay it upon the girl’s shoulder. They made a pretty group; but Mr. Beresford, who was leaning over the little table, talking earnestly, did not care for the interruption. A slight cloud came over his face when his daughter came within hearing. He finished what he was saying quickly, and then

was silent; it had not been intended for her ear. While on the other side of the room the young men looked at each other in a kind of armed truce, and a moment of dead silence elapsed, the first that had occurred since they came into the room, in the midst of which Mrs. Meredith was heard saying, 'I fear you are not amusing yourself, Cara. Are the boys disagreeable? Go and sing something for us. I like your soft little voice on Sunday night. Sing me the "Angels;" that suits you best.'

'Just what I was going to suggest,' said Oswald, getting up and going to the piano to open it for her. It was in the back part of the room, which was but partially lighted. Both the others, in their different ways, bestowed a private benediction on Oswald, who was more ready than either of them. They sat looking wistfully into the dimness, listening to Cara's soft voice, which rose out of it like a bird. 'Angels, ever bright and fair,' she sang, looking herself, that little white vision, only half-visible, like anything angelic or fairy-like, which the imagination chose to select. Roger listened with his heart full. But for the apparition of that other figure beside her, behind her, who stood keeping time with an involuntary movement of his head and hand in a way which tempted even his brother to blaspheme, Roger's heart would have run over with a soft ecstasy. He had never heard Cara sing before, except in her schoolgirl days. As for the other two, the elder pair, Mr. Beresford's countenance cleared and he resumed his talk, and Mrs. Meredith once more gave him her whole attention, while Edward and Roger stared into the back drawing-room. They did not address nor take any notice of each other, but gazed blankly at Cara, who, having already one attendant, evidently wanted none of them. When she had come to an end of that song, Mrs. Meredith, though she was to all appearance absorbed in what Mr. Beresford was saying, cast a word over her shoulder to the young performer.

'That was very sweet; thank you, dear. Now sing us something else.' And Cara went on.

Roger sat and listened, between misery and rapture. He did not know which predominated. Edward, to whose state of mind no one had any clue, turned over a book, and hummed the air she was singing. Not a word passed between the young men, notwithstanding that they were both boys, as Cara had said, both going to India, and with every kind of bond of

external resemblance. But Roger did not feel any direct hatred to Edward as he did to the other, who was always thrusting himself forward; and thus an hour passed away. When that was over, Cara rose and said good-night. Then there was a question who was to take her home, which showed as much as did his own attitude—reclining tranquilly in his chair—that Mr. Beresford had no idea of going away. Here Roger sprang to the front, for once forestalling Oswald. He took his leave hurriedly, with confused thanks to Mrs. Meredith, and followed Cara closely as she went downstairs, alarmed lest someone might interfere even at the last moment. It was but a few steps, unfortunately, from one door to the other, and though she lingered a moment on the step, wrapping her shawl closely around her, Cara did not ask him to go in.

‘It was very kind of you to come,’ she said, giving him her hand; ‘and I am afraid you have not enjoyed it, Roger; but you will like them better when you see more of them.’ She said this as people say so many things, apologetic and otherwise, not because she wanted to apologise for the Merediths, but because she did not know very well what to say.

‘I don’t think I shall ever like them,’ said Roger; ‘but that does not matter. Cara, let me just say one word. I don’t think that they are the right kind of people—for you.’

‘For me!’ After the first astonishment Cara laughed. ‘I did not think you set up for being such a critic. What have they done to make you think ill of them? They have been very kind to you.’

‘I did not want their kindness,’ said Roger, hotly; ‘they are not the kind of people I like to see you with, Cara.’

‘I think I will say good-night,’ said Cara, with dignity. ‘It is cold here, and you have a long walk to Notting Hill. It is a pity you missed your train. Good-night.’

She did not so much as look at him, as she turned away and disappeared, the door closing behind her. He had offended her now to make an appropriate finish of this unhappy Sunday! But however cold it might have been to Cara, it was not cold to Roger as he pushed his way at a tremendous pace along the Sunday streets, so much darker than usual on account of the closed shops, and filled with passengers so different from the usual crowd. He would have kept himself warm in Siberia at that pace. His aunt was waiting for him, but half-disposed to give up her watch, and wondering what had become of him, as he thought she would.

'I am very glad to have you for another night, Roger; but I thought you must have rushed off to catch the train without thinking of your portmanteau,' she said; and then she gave him a glass of wine, half-proud, half-disappointed to hear that he had dined 'with his fine friends,' and sent him to bed with kind good-nights; for he had to start early in the morning, and, no doubt, she thought, the day had been fatiguing, though so pleasant. She was kinder than Cara; perhaps it would have been better for him if he had not gone to the Square at all, but contented himself with Notting Hill.

CHAPTER XVII.

EDWARD.

CARA had a visitor quite early next day, when she had just retired upstairs to the drawing-room after breakfast. It was Edward Meredith, who came with some message from his mother. He had been Cara's friend when they were both children, though Oswald was the one who had claimed her intimacy since she grew up; and he had come now on a sort of investigation to see for himself whether his brother had taken his place. I think Cara, too, had a consciousness of Edward's meaning, though neither of them could have put it into words; and no idea of love, properly so called, was in the minds of the boy and girl. To be sure, he was twenty-one, no longer legally a boy, and thought himself very much a man in many ways. He was aware that the little serious maiden, who had been the friend of his childhood, appeared very sweet and attractive to him now, and that he did not like Oswald to assume the privileged place by her, to be the one who talked with her and walked with her, and offered her those small services which it is often more pleasant to render than to receive. Edward was not jealous of his brother, but he had the suppressed consciousness of being placed at a disadvantage by Oswald, which is not very unusual in the mind of the younger of such a pair. Oswald had been, not above him, but a step in front of him all his life; he had what those who did not like him called more showy qualities, what those who did like him described as greater talents than Edward's. He talked better, he was more ready in

demonstration of his sentiments, and could always express himself—whether on paper or in speech—more fluently. These were real advantages; and to these, as was natural, the young man who felt himself to be second added others which were not so real. He thought Oswald's verses, and literary pretensions, and gracefulness, and good looks were all infinitely superior to his own, and was apt to be depressed, and not to do himself justice in Oswald's presence. It was a relief to find how late Oswald was, and that he could come in, early in the morning, to test Cara, and find out if all her friendliness had been transferred to his brother. If so, Edward would not grumble, but he would know what he had to expect, and would not look for anything more. When he had delivered his mother's message, there was a little pause. They had both a little ingenuous awe of each other, and did not know how to begin.

'How long it is since I have been here!' Edward said at last; 'not since the days when I used to be afraid to move for fear of breaking some of the beautiful things. My mother wisely refrained from china in those days; but we were always told that Mrs. Beresford was "very particular." You do not mind my speaking of her? I remember her so well lying on the sofa, like a picture. You are like her, Cara, but not very like her——'

'No; for she was beautiful,' said Cara, simply; and Edward took her words as she said them, without interposing a laughing compliment, as Oswald would have done. 'I do not mind; though sometimes I wonder, when I am sitting alone here——'

'You wonder? what?'

'All about her,' said Cara, her voice dropping lower; 'about her dying. Don't you think it must be hard to die like that when everybody wishes you to live? And then—about—whether she ever comes here? the drawing-room is just as she left it——'

Edward looked round it, following her glance. He did not smile; his countenance had an air of sympathy and interest, almost awe.

'It is so strange, sitting here when all the house is still. One seems to see a chair placed differently to what it was before. I did not do it; and then everything is so still. One feels as if someone was looking, gazing at one. Some—'

times I am sure that the eyes are there—not unkind, to frighten me, but solemn and steady, not changing from one thing to another, as we do. Did you ever think what happens when we die?’

‘Not much, I am afraid,’ said the young man, himself feeling the spell of the stillness, and as if those eyes might be upon him of which she spoke. ‘But Cara, you ought not to be here by yourself, for it cannot be good for you to feel like this, or to be thinking such things. I like you to be here; but it would be better, more natural, for you in the country. You ought not to stay——’

‘This is home,’ said Cara, with a little sigh; and then she brightened up. ‘I think I am making believe for the pleasure of being sympathised with,’ she said. ‘I am not dull. It is only sometimes, only now and then, in the morning. Somehow one feels more lonely in the morning, when everybody is busy. To have nothing to do, and to see no one all the long, active forenoon! At the Hill one could run out in the garden; there was always something to do; or if it rained, there was work; but no one asks what I do with myself here.’

‘My poor little Cara! forgive me. I thought you were a little girl again.’

‘Oh, I don’t need to forgive you. It is very kind of you, Edward. Am I a little girl, or am I rather old? I can’t be quite sure sometimes. I suppose it is because I am fanciful,’ said Cara, the tears coming to her eyes in spite of herself. ‘Aunt Cherry always said I was. Look, I am going to cry—for nothing at all! You never—th—thought I was so silly,’ she said, with a smile on her face, but a childish sob breaking her voice.

‘I wish you were with Aunt Cherry again,’ said Edward; ‘you ought not to be left by yourself here.’

‘Oh, I must be here. It is home, and I like it—sometimes. Your mother is very kind to me; and Oswald comes and talks——’

Perhaps it was scarcely possible that Edward should resist this temptation to inquire into Oswald’s degree of favour. He was not jealous. No, he thought, he felt sure that he was not jealous; but he was always the second, and no one likes that. He felt a slight passing sting and check when she spoke of Oswald, and in spite of himself could not but feel anxious to find out what degree of intimacy existed between them.

'Do you say this to Oswald? Does he know?' he added.

'I never said anything,' said Cara, recovering herself; 'why should I?' it was nonsense. And then Oswald has so much to tell me about *him*—it is much more amusing than to chatter about one's self. Don't think me very silly, Edward. It was because you seemed to want to know about *me*——'

'So I did,' he said; 'so I do, Cara. It was you and I that used to be the friends. Oswald was bigger, don't you remember? It was always you and I——'

Cara made no direct reply to this representation. She even disregarded the anxious look he gave her, as he made this appeal to old recollections, of which she was not specially thinking at this moment for her part.

'How different people are,' she said. 'Some people tell you about themselves; some make you talk, I don't know how, of *you*. I don't think you would have a good moral effect upon me, Edward. You make me selfish; you make me think of myself. Oswald does not ask about me. He makes me listen to him. Oh, it is very pleasant, and it must be better, I feel sure——'

'You like it better? I am such an uninteresting fellow, Cara, not like Oswald. I prefer to hear about you——'

'Thanks,' she said, with a little shy glance at him, and a slight reddening which she could not explain. 'Did you think poor Roger very rough and very strange last night? I hope you did not think badly of him. He was, perhaps, a little cross, but he is not like that always, not even often. I don't think I ever saw him so cross before.'

'I understand him, Cara. He was an old friend, too, and he hoped to have you to himself; whereas he found you among still older friends than he was, and intimate, and at your ease. And he was not at all at his ease—I understand him. I have had the very same sort of thing happen to me.'

'With whom?' Cara asked rather abruptly. She was surprised, even slightly nettled, without knowing why. Did Edward know any other girl well enough? she asked herself. It was nothing to her, and yet she was half-displeased.

'Oh, with no one in particular,' he said. 'I have stolen a march upon Oswald,' he added, with a laugh. 'I have had the luck of the early bird. He was always a late fellow. To be sure, he sits up writing when the rest of us go to bed,'

'And is it true that he would not go to India, and put it upon you? I am very fond of poetry,' said Cara; 'I would rather be a poet than anything else in the world; but not to put the disagreeable work upon someone else—not to please myself at the expense of another——'

'That is not the way to put it, Cara. I am really the one that can go best. Oswald should have a brilliant career at home. He is clever enough to do whatever he pleases, but it is not the same with me. Oh, I am not going in for humility; I can cram for an examination better than he can; it is a humble quality, but it is very serviceable. So we have both the part that suits us best.'

'But you don't like it, Edward.'

'Which of us likes best the special thing he has got to do? We all think something else would be better. Even you, Cara——oh, Heaven knows I did not mean to vex you. Is it I that have brought the tears into your eyes?'

'No,' she said, putting out her hand; 'but it is quite true. I am——out of sorts, I suppose, this morning. I can't help crying; and what you say is quite true. One always thinks something else would be better. Aunt Cherry says the same thing, but different. Edward, I will try to go to my India as you go to yours——without grumbling——'

'If I had not grumbled, you would not have known anything about it,' he said; 'and, Cara, if you were coming to India I should not grumble. I should be quite reconciled. It is parting from——everyone I care for, that makes it so hard to me.'

A kind of crimson reflection had come over Cara's face—not a blush, much more visionary than real—a reflection of a blush: the touch of a vague sentiment which was somehow in the air, and which lighted upon the girl's face because it was more sensitive than the boy's—that was all. But he saw the shadow of a rosy tint over her features, and it moved him with a vague sweetness of fancy, he did not quite know what. If Cara were to go to India—not with him, not as his wife, his thoughts had not gone so far—but if she, too, had to go, in some incomprehensible, delightful way, how the aspect of that banishment would change! All at once, as he sat there, he seemed to see himself looking over the high bulwarks of the ship by her side, the blue water flying in soft ripples behind them, the foam-bubbles dancing on the waves, the

sunshine shining, all the world so new and so sweet. How distinctly he realised the scene, which was just about as likely as that the Queen should go with Edward to India! He came back from that vision as from a long way off, with a half-choking sigh. 'That is nonsense, I suppose. Still it is that, and not India, that vexes me. Parting from those I care for here.'

'And Oswald—would have had that, too.'

'Yes,' said Edward, doubtfully; 'Oswald would have had that, too—but Oswald——'

He stopped, and Cara did not ask him to go on. There was a little doubt in the repetition of the name. 'But Oswald——' What was he going to say? She was too shy, too conscious, to ask. Cara did not blush, even in this shadowy way, when Oswald spoke to her, but she had a vague sense that perhaps he would be pleased to make her blush, would like to move her. She was far more clear-sighted about him than about Edward. Just as she knew her own power over Roger, she knew that Oswald would be pleased to have a like power over herself. She did not discriminate these fine differences of sentiment in words, but she was aware of them, without attempting definition. She could play upon Roger if she pleased as upon an instrument, and Oswald was trying, and would like to bring music out of her in the same way. She knew this instinctively, and perhaps Cara would not have been very much surprised to be told that Oswald was 'in love' with her; but about Edward she had no insight, no theory. He was kind, and she could talk to him and open her heart; that was all she knew.

Just then they were interrupted by the entrance of Oswald himself, who came in, as he had got into the habit of doing, after his late breakfast. 'Hallo, Ned, you here!' he said, in a tone of surprise. He was not by any means delighted by the appearance of his brother. 'I did not expect to find you occupied so early,' he said to Cara. 'Have you had the bear at your levee, too? I hope he has recovered his temper this morning. If your natives in Berkshire are all of that complexion, Cara, I don't wonder you are glad to get away.'

'Poor Roger! he did not mean to be rude. Did Mrs. Meredith think he was a bear?'

'Oh, my mother! She would not be the universal charmer she is if she was not something of a hypocrite,' said Oswald. 'You may be sure she will not allow that any of her visitors is

ever disagreeable. I suppose Ned brought you her message about going out? Then I need not repeat it. And there is to be a tea-drinking to-morrow, Cara, with all sorts of strange beasts—authors and authoresses, and that kind of people. If you will keep close to me I'll tell you who they are. It will be a very funny company.'

'But, Oswald, I thought you were an author, too. Why do you laugh at them? I should have thought there would be sympathy——'

'Wait till you see them,' he said, with a laugh. 'My dear little Cara, there is a great difference always between out-and-out professionals and—other people. A man may indulge in as much literature as he pleases, and it does him no harm—indeed, it may chance to do him a little good. But the people who have nothing but literature to stand upon, that's a different thing altogether; they are generally people who are out of society. Ned, what are you going to do this morning? You don't mean to say you are wasting your time like an ordinary mortal? You were supposed to have gone to Westminster Hall, or the British Museum, or at the very least, the London Library. See how cheaply some people get a character for virtue! and all the time, Cara, he was amusing himself and talking to you.'

'I am going to work now,' said Edward. 'Remember, this is the first chance I have had of seeing Cara. You are not to sit and think,' he said softly, taking her hand. 'Go to my mother, will you, Cara? Do not stay all the long morning here.'

'I shall not be—dull,' she said, in the same tone, with a grateful, friendly look, which went to Edward's heart. He was comforted, though he had to go away and leave the field clear for his brother, and did so without even the half-painful, half-compunctious feeling as of a grudge which he was ashamed of, which generally moved him when Oswald was concerned. Why should he entertain any grudge at his brother's success? If Oswald was not more agreeable, more bright, more winning than himself, he would not be more popular. But, more than all these reasonings, with which he was familiar, Edward felt the consolation of those discriminating words by which Cara had indicated the difference between himself and his brother—he, who made her talk; Oswald, who talked of himself. This kept him warm all the way to Westminster Hall, or

wherever else it was that he went to pursue his studies for the future government of India; but perhaps the way in which he had occupied the first hours of the morning did not make his mind more clear for this much more important subject of thought.

‘It is well that there should be one hard-working fellow in the family,’ said Oswald, as the door closed, ‘for the family’s sake; and then it is astonishing what a zest it gives to one’s own leisure—like—I suppose I must not quote Latin to you, Cara—like seeing a ship pitching and tossing at sea when one is safe on shore.’

‘How can you say so! how dare you say so!’ cried Cara, with flashing eyes. ‘Oh, what is the good of your poetry and stuff if it only makes you enjoy the sight of another person working—doing what you ought to have done! Is that all the good it is? It ought to be something pure, something noble, something to make your heart rise——’

‘Why, Cara!’ cried Oswald, aghast, yet half-laughing. ‘Poetry and stuff! is it you who are speaking, or someone else? This is quite a new outbreak for you.’

‘I did not mean that,’ cried Cara, with the hot blush of youthful shame; ‘still, if poetry does not make you more—a man—does not make you stronger and better, and more noble and true——’

‘My dear little girl! Poetry is not morals and the Ten Commandments. You have got confused in your reasonings. Come, never mind scolding me, Cara. Listen to this. Your little temper has been put out with your bear last night, and Ned’s gravities this morning. You want me to smooth you down again. And I don’t like to be scolded. It answers with coarser natures, but I am too sensitive. I want the warm atmosphere of commendation to bring me out. Ask my mother if it has not been ever thus from childhood’s hour. Ned can stand it. You may scold him for his good as much as you please—he will like it; but come here, Cara mia. Listen to this——’

‘Oh, Oswald!’

‘Don’t scold me, Cara! Look here. I am just going to send it off to the *Piccadilly*. I shall not be half so sure of it unless my little critic approves. Come, you are not going to be hardhearted. I do want so very much to hear what you think of this.’

He held out the dainty little manuscript, set forth in those irregular lines which are dear to youth. And Cara could not help feeling the pleasure and the grandeur of being his critic, and of hearing the poem read by its author, which was going to be printed, and to live for ever. It glanced across her mind how when Oswald was a great poet, as great as Tennyson or Browning, people would tell how he used to go and read his young verses to a girl whom he had known when he was a child; and this little scene arranged itself historically in her mind as a scene which would make the hearts of other girls beat with secret envy of her, the confidant of a poet. Thus Cara was mollified and yielded, and criticised only the verses, not the poet. Indeed, her criticism of the verses was of the mildest description, just enough to give zest to her almost unbounded praise. And the poet enjoyed himself greatly reading those innocent lines—which were quite innocent, if somewhat insipid—seeing her absorbed face and soft eyes full of attention, and delighting himself in the melody he had made. How wonderful is this appetite of youth for mere rhyme! Cara listened to each line chiming with the other in a trance of attention. It was as sweet to her as if it had been the truest music, and charmed her very soul.

Oswald went down to the office of the *Piccadilly* afterwards, in great satisfaction with his work. Sometimes these productions brought him in a guinea or two, and then how pleased he was! more pleased than if he had inherited a fortune. He thought himself on the high road to fame and fortune when this happened, and was pleased to let his friends think that he made a good deal of money by his pen. Luckily for him, he did not need to put any dependence upon these dilettante earnings; but they sweetened life to him, if they did not put much money in his purse. And the idea of Cara gave him a soft pleasure. He, too, thought how it might be told hereafter that his first critic was a beautiful girl, and that it was her enthusiasm which stirred him on to the heights he afterwards attained. 'And what became of the beautiful girl?' he thought he could hear somebody ask in posterity. Yes, indeed! what became of her? Should she marry the poet, and be his muse and his critic combined, or should she be drifted away into some other career, and carry the memory of him with her to her last day, not quite breaking her heart, perhaps, or at least no more than could be mended? He

smiled as he went along, with a little conscious warmth on his face, and wondered how this would be.

But just then chance threw something else in his way. He met a procession of school girls—not a very wonderful thing—attended by one or two Sisters of one of the many modern Anglican sisterhoods, in poke bonnets and black veils, decorations which are often very effective when they surround a fair young countenance. Oswald had just caught sight of one which charmed him, and which was enclosed by a poke less rigid, and a veil less heavy than the others, which he concluded to mean novicehood, or even *mère associateship*. The owner of this soft serious face was too young to have made any permanent choice of so grave a kind, and was, indeed, only a governess to whom a modification of the conventual dress had been permitted as a privilege. Oswald crossed the road, and went along very demurely, though it was not his way, parallel with the procession, looking furtively, and, as he flattered himself, with purely artistic admiration, at the little shepherdess of the flock. ‘She is a Perugino,’ he said to himself, and already the ready verses began to flutter to his lips. He would write a poem about her; she was the most charming subject—a true Perugino, with just that warm glow of colour, not fair but mellow—those soft features, those modest eyes. He began on the spot:—

From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
Fair face! that thus so sweetly can combine
The maiden and the mother ever young—

(The reader will perceive that Oswald's verses were not of the highest quality.) He had got just this length when a sudden shriek disturbed him. The little procession was crossing a side street, and one of the younger children had made a rush from her companion, and in a moment, before anyone could draw a breath, had been knocked down and apparently crushed by a cart which came lumbering slowly up the street, too slow and too heavy to alarm anyone. Oswald, to do him justice, was not given to mooning when there was any need for active service. He rushed across the street, reaching the scene of the disaster before anyone else, except his Perugino, who had flown with one small cry, and was herself half under the heavy cart, pushing it back with all her force, while the others stood aghast and shrieked, not knowing what to do.

Nothing could be more swift, more ready, than the Perugino novice. She had already drawn the child half into her arms before Oswald reached the spot, and was feeling the little limbs all over, with a little panting cry, half horror, half want of breath. 'Let me carry the child to the nearest doctor,' cried Oswald. The colour had all gone out of the Perugino face—the big wheel of the cart touching her delicate shoulder made a background for her; she was a St. Catherine now. 'There is something broken; 'she must go to the hospital,' the girl said, looking up at him with that sudden acquaintance and confidence which comes in such a moment. Her shoulder brushed against him as she transferred the little burden to him. The child had fainted. He took the poor little crushed creature in his arms. They were within a stone's throw of the great hospital, and there was nothing to be done but to carry it there. The elder Sister by this time had joined them, sending the curious, anxious, crying girls away under the charge of the remaining governess. 'Agnes, you ought to go back with them. You are as white as a sheet. You will faint,' said the Sister, putting an arm round the girl.

'Oh, no; I am better. Let me go and see what it is,' she said.

Agnes? Was that the name? It was one of the saints, he had felt sure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TELLING TALES.

'ROGER has been to pay dear Cara a visit,' said Mrs. Burchell. 'He was in London on Sunday with his kind aunt, at Notting Hill, and he thought he would call. I don't approve of Sunday visits, but I suppose exceptions must be made sometimes, and Roger went; knowing her all his life, you know, he felt interested. Do you know a family called Meredith, Miss Charity? I should not think, from what he tells me of them, that they can be people you would care to know.'

'Meredith! but of course you know them, Aunt Charity—poor Annie's friend, whom she was so fond of—the only person who was allowed to come in when she was ill—the most delightful, kind woman.'

‘People change as years go on; and Cherry is always enthusiastic—gushing, as my young people say. But do you know, Miss Charity, that poor Mr. Beresford is always there? dining there on Sunday; sitting till one does not know how late; and she is a woman separated from her husband,’ said Mrs. Burchell, lowering her voice. ‘I am sure that is a thing of which you cannot approve.’

‘Of women separating from their husbands?’ Miss Charity was sitting in her dressing-gown, in her bedroom, by the fire. She had been laid up by ‘one of her attacks.’ This was how everybody spoke of it; and though she was completely out of danger, it was necessary to take care. The consequence was that she lived in her bedroom, and chiefly in her dressing-gown, and was sometimes fretful, hard to manage, and a strain upon Miss Cherry’s powers. Almost any visitor, who would come and bring a little variety, and particularly a little news, was an advantage; therefore Cherry was very reluctant to interfere with what Mrs. Burchell said, especially as she was hungering for news of the child who, though she wrote so regularly, did not say half what Miss Cherry wanted to hear.

‘I can’t pronounce on such a question without knowing the circumstances,’ said Miss Charity. ‘Women are fools, but then so are most men as well.’

‘Oh, Miss Charity! that is one of your quaint ways of stating things. Mr. Burchell always says you have such quaint ways of expressing yourself; but always judicious, quite above what could be expected from a woman.’

‘Mr. Burchell is a good judge; he has means of knowing what may be expected from a woman,’ said the old lady, sharply. ‘And so you think badly of Mrs. Meredith? But make your mind easy; she is not separated from her husband.’

‘Not!’ Mrs. Burchell echoed the negative in a tone which was faint with disappointment. ‘Oh, but pardon me, I fear you must be mistaken, for Roger says——’

‘I thought that boy was a nice boy. What have you done to him to make him a gossip? Cherry, that was the one I thought well of, was it not? The others were naught, except Agnes; but this was a nice boy.’

‘Agnes is very self-willed,’ said Mrs. Burchell; ‘she is gone to that mission, though I am sure there is plenty to do

at home and in the parish. I don't know what to say to her. But as for the others being naught, I don't think it is very kind of you to say so,' she added, looking as if she meant to cry.

'It is only one of my quaint ways of expressing myself,' said Miss Charity, grimly. 'I hate a boy who is a gossip. It is bad enough in girls; but then one is sorry for the poor things that have nothing better to do. What does this boy of yours say? If he was my boy, I'd whip him for tale-telling. And what was he doing in the Square?'

'My children have always been brought up to confide in their mother,' said Mrs. Burchell, on the verge of tears; 'they have always told me their impressions. Thank Heaven, though my lot is not luxurious like some people's, I have always had comfort in my children.'

'That is a hit at you and me, Cherry, who have no children,' said the old lady, who was sharp and keen after her illness. 'My dear, we are quite willing to admit your superiority. What did the boy say?'

'I am sure there was no boasting in my mind. I have very little occasion to boast. A poor clergyman's wife, with so large a family to bring up! but I *am* proud of the confidence of my children. Dear Roger went to see Cara out of kindness. He has always had a kind feeling to her, and the poor boy's heart was quite touched to see her among such people. They seem to live in an ungodly way, with dinner-parties on Sunday, and that sort of thing—no regard for poor servants or for the bad example they are setting. And as for the lady, Roger did not tell me all; but he says Mr. Beresford *stays*—stays after Cara goes home, and, in short, is never out of the house. I felt that you ought to be told. Gentlemen have very peculiar ideas, I know—they don't follow our rules; but for a man to take his daughter, his young daughter, into such society—'

'Maria!' Miss Cherry was speechless with horror and dismay. She managed to get out this ejaculation, and no more. But the old lady was less easily moved. She put on the spectacles to which she had taken quite lately, and looked into her visitor's face.

'Here is an odd thing now,' she said, 'a very odd thing. I am willing to suppose you are an innocent sort of woman, Maria Burchell. You never did anything very bad—for one

thing, you have never been tempted—and yet you are ready to believe any evil, at the first word, of another woman whom you know nothing in the world about. It is the oddest thing I know. If you had been a wicked person, one could have understood it. But a clergyman's wife, as you say, in a quiet country place, out of the way of temptation—why, you ought to think well of everybody! You ought to be the sort of person who could be taken in, who would not believe harm of anyone, an innocent woman like you!

'Am I an innocent woman?' said Mrs. Burchell, shaking her head, with a sad smile. The distinction, if flattering to her moral character, was derogatory to her dignity. 'Ah, how little we know each other! and what is called charity is so often mere laxness of principle. I hope I know the depravity of my own heart.'

'In that case, my dear, there's nothing more to be said,' said Miss Charity, briskly, 'only that you ought not to come here under false pretences, taking us all in, and looking respectable, as you do. But, however bad you may be, Mrs. Meredith is not bad. I don't know much about the husband; perhaps they don't get on together very well. Perhaps it is health. She lives here, and he lives there—that is all I know; but she is a better woman than I am; that I'll answer for. How she can put up with that fool of a nephew of mine, I can't tell. He is very learned, I grant, and a fellow of half the societies. Well, and so your boy said——? What is the woman crying for, I would like to know?'

'Oh!' wept Mrs. Burchell, 'I never thought to have lived to be so spoken to; and by an old friend. Oh, Cherry! you that have known me from a girl, how can you sit still and do your knitting, and hear me talked to so?'

'She does not mean it,' said Miss Cherry, softly, 'dear Maria! She has been ill. She can't help being a little irritable.'

'Stuff!' said Miss Charity. 'She brought it on herself. Go away, Cherry; if I were irritable, it is you who would feel it first. Now, Maria, don't be more of a fool than you can help. What did the boy say?'

Miss Cherry went back to her knitting, with a suppressed sigh. It was very true that it was she who paid the penalty first; but to see anybody crying troubled the kind soul. She gave a kind little pat as she passed to Mrs. Burchell's fat

shoulders. She was knitting a huge white shawl in thick wool, to keep the old lady warm, and her own slight person was half lost in its folds.

But there was not very much more to be got from Mrs. Burchell. The boy had not, indeed, said any more, nor so much as she had reported. He had been betrayed by the sore state of his feelings, poor Roger, to give a very slight sketch of his uncomfortable Sunday—how he did not think the lady to whom Mr. Beresford talked so earnestly, who had a husband, and yet had no husband—who asked people to dinner on Sunday, and who—but Roger did not say this—had two sons who interfered so uncomfortably with his own inclinations—was at all a good friend for Cara. This was the extent of Roger's confidence, and he regretted bitterly having given it before the evening was out; for it is one thing to disburden your heart of a grievance, and quite another to have that grievance enlarged and embittered by constant reference and repetition. He heard so much of it before he left the Rectory that evening that he was furious with himself for having betrayed his wound, and felt ashamed of it, and guilty so far as Cara was concerned. Therefore, Mrs. Burchell was rather glad of the personal offence which concealed the fact that she had very little to say. It had given a great zest to her visit that she had Roger's news to tell; but there was much less detail than she could have desired, so she dropped into her own personal grievance about Agnes, who had insisted on going to the mission-house to teach, when there was plenty to do at home; but neither of the ladies entered warmly into it, Agnes being a greater favourite with them than her mother. When she was gone, however, Miss Charity fell into a musing. Age had crept a little, just a little, upon her. She was no longer the vigorous woman, of no particular age, whom Dr. Maxwell had commended as a type of woman-kind. Winter is unfavourable to the human frame when it approaches seventy: With a soft, perpetual summer, never blazing, as it is in the south, and chequered by no chilly gales, would it be necessary that threescore and ten should be man's limit, or that we should ever die? Miss Charity felt the unkindly influence of the winter. When summer came back she would be all right again—or so, at least, she thought.

'It is amazing, the ill people have in their thoughts,' she said, at last. 'That woman, with her "laxness of principle"

and her depraved heart, and her indignation to be taken at her word ! Now, Cherry, that was an inoffensive girl enough. When she was Maria Thompson there was no particular harm in her. I believe we ought all to die at twenty. What a deal of mischief it would save the world.'

'And good, too,' said Miss Cherry, in her soft voice.

'Good ! not so much good. Do you know, I don't feel comfortable about Mrs. Meredith. I know she's a nice woman ; but, bless my soul, the number of nice women I have known, who have been—no better than they should be ! And Cara, you know—Cara is our business, Cherry ; we are her nearest relations. I do believe she would be better here. Nobody can say that you are—no better than you should be. You don't form friendships with men. I daresay that's all Mrs. Meredith's sin at bottom.'

'But that is only,' said Miss Cherry, composedly, 'because there are no men to form friendships with. You may laugh, Aunt Charity ; but I say quite what I mean. I am not a young girl—neither is Mrs. Meredith. If she is good to my poor brother James, shouldn't we be grateful ? And as for Cara—though Heaven knows how much I would give to have her back again—'

'Who is that at the door ? I won't see any more people—that woman has put me out for the day. Though I know it is nonsense, I can't get it out of my head. She is a great deal too fond of being popular. She is——. Whom do you say ? Mr. Maxwell ? to be sure, it is his day. Well, I suppose he must come in, of course. And just as well ; we can ask him, and set it to rest.'

Mr. Maxwell came in, as he had done regularly every week for no one knew how many years. He was redder and rustier, and perhaps a trifle stouter ; but that did not show to familiar eyes. Otherwise, the five years which had elapsed since Mrs. Beresford's death had made no alteration in the doctor. He was on that tableland in the middle of life when five years tell less than at any other period. He came in with the slight bustle which was characteristic of him, and sat down by Miss Charity, and got through quickly that little confidential talk which is necessary between a doctor and his patient, during which Miss Cherry took her big piece of work to the window, and stood there, holding the mass of white wool in her arms, and knitting on, with her back towards the others.

When this formula had been gone through she returned to her chair. Her interest in the matter was too great to allow even her aunt to open it. 'Have you seen my brother James lately?' she said.

'Your brother James!' The question seemed to startle and confuse the doctor. 'We have seen very little of each other, these five years.'

'Ah! I thought you were not so intimate,' said Miss Cherry, whom the suspicion had pained. 'Is there—any reason? I should like so much to know.'

'Well! I suppose there always is some reason or other. But no—estrangements come by accident constantly, Miss Cherry. I can't tell what is the reason. I don't suppose I know. We have drifted apart, that's all; people do so every day without knowing why.'

'People know when it begins,' said Miss Cherry, eagerly; but here she was interrupted by her aunt.

'Never mind about estrangements. What we want to ask you, Mr. Maxwell, is whether you have seen Cara, little Cara, you remember? and also something about their neighbours. There is Mrs. Meredith, for instance. We hear she sees a great deal of them. Eh! why shouldn't I tell Mr. Maxwell exactly what we have heard? A doctor isn't a tale-bearer; he'd lose all his practice in a week. We've been disturbed by hearing (especially Cherry; she is more particular than I) something about Mrs. Meredith. You, that know everything, tell us if it is true.'

'I have seen very little of Mrs. Meredith. I don't know much about James. Cara would be a great deal better here. What does he want with the child in London? he doesn't require her; he has done without her all these years. I'd have her back, Miss Charity, if I were you.'

'It is very easy to talk of having her back. She is his child after all. Come, speak out; they say James is there constantly—and that this lady—she isn't separated from that husband of hers, eh?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Not that you know of! Of course you know whatever there is to know. What is the matter? A woman should not let herself be talked of.'

'Mrs. Meredith is not talked of, if that is what you meant but I have heard that James is constantly there. He oughtn't

to do it. If he is fond of her, as I don't doubt he is fond of her——'

'Mr. Maxwell; how can you speak so of my brother?' said Miss Cherry, agitated and blushing, with the tears ready to come. 'A married woman! I am sure he has no more thought of anything of the kind. What has his life been since Annie died? That speaks for itself; he has thought of no one but her.'

'Hold your tongue, Cherry, my dear. You are an old maid; but you have a foolish young soul. What do you know of such things? Let us talk it over quietly. Now, Mr. Maxwell, you need not be upon p's and q's with me. If he is fond of her? that is the question. Nothing but what is innocent, you goose. We don't think James a bad man, do you suppose? Now, doctor, we must be at the bottom of it, now we have opened the question. What do people say?'

'I say—if he is fond of her, he oughtn't to compromise her, Miss Charity; that is all about it. Innocent! of course it's all innocent enough; but the woman is married, and her husband is thousands of miles off, and he ought to have more sense than to go there every evening, as he does. Yes, we've talked of it among ourselves; not to let it go any further; not to make any scandal, Heaven knows. No one thinks of any scandal; but he oughtn't to do it. I am not blaming your brother, Miss Cherry; he has fallen into it, poor fellow, without knowing. He and I are not such friends as we were. I have thought I had reason not to be quite pleased with him; but I don't do him injustice here. He means no harm; but he oughtn't to do it. The more he is fond of her, the more he ought to take care. And there you have my opinion, and that's all about it. I don't think anyone has ever ventured to say more.'

'It is too much to have said,' said the old lady, 'and she ought to know better. I don't put it all on him. She ought to have put a stop to it. Women see these things better than men; and besides, it is the women who suffer, not the men. She ought to have put a stop to it. I don't put it all on him, as you seem disposed to do.'

'How could she put a stop to it?' said the doctor, warmly. 'She is good to everybody. She opened her house to him when he was miserable. How is a woman to say to a man, after she has been kind to him, "Don't come any more; people are beginning to talk?" Good Lord! it would be

like supposing they had some reason to talk. If any woman said that to me I should feel that she thought me a brute bad enough for anything. No, no; everybody says women are hardest upon each other——’

‘Everybody says a deal of nonsense,’ said Miss Charity, sharply. ‘A woman does not need to speak so plainly. She can let the man see when he is going too far without a word said. How? oh; there’s no need to tell *you* how. We know how, that’s enough. She could have done it, and she ought to have done it. Still, I don’t think any harm of her; and it must simply be put a stop to, now we know.’

‘Ah!’ said the doctor, drawing a long breath, ‘but how?’

‘How, again? Why, what kind of people are you who call yourselves their friends? It’s your business to do it. Cherry, my dear, I am a deal better; the bronchitis is all gone, and Barbara is as careful of me as a woman can be. You’ll go off directly to the Square. If I were well enough, if it were not for this stupid bronchitis, I’d go myself; but it isn’t worth a life; is it, doctor? See how things are going on. Of course you won’t make any fuss, Cherry; but whatever ought to be done you’ll do.’

Maxwell turned, as the old lady made this address to her niece, and looked at her. What would poor old Cherry do? he said to himself, watching her with curiosity and wonder. Was she a person to face this dilemma, which had kept various and more determined persons in difficulty? She let her work drop upon her knee, and looked up with an agitated face. She grew pale and red, and pale again.

‘How am I to speak to James?’ she said, hurriedly catching her breath—‘a man!’

Then she made a pause and an effort, and the doctor, astonished, saw a soft light of resolution come into the mild old maiden’s face.

‘Of course,’ she said, still a little breathless, ‘I will not think of that if there is anything I can do.’

‘And of course there is something to do!’ said the more energetic old lady. ‘My patience! what do people get old for, doctor? I should do it without thinking twice. What do they say about a sound mind in a sound body? I wish, for my own part, when an old woman gets bronchitis, she could get it in her soul as well, and be all bad together. But

for this old body, I'm as strong as ever I was; and Cherry was always weakly, poor dear.'

'Do not vex yourself, Aunt Charity; I will go,' said Miss Cherry, with only a slight faltering in her voice. 'Mrs. Meredith is a good woman, and my brother James is a good man too, though I wish he was more religious. When a thing is plain duty, that makes it—easy; well, if not easy, at least ——. I will do my best,' she said softly. Mr. Maxwell watched her quite intently. It was all very well to say this here; but would she venture to do it? He had always taken an interest in Cherry, more or less. All these years, during which he had come weekly to the Hill, he had been always sensible when Cherry was not there, and had a way of looking round for her grey gown when he came in. Everybody knew his way of looking round, but no one, much less the chief person concerned, had ever divined that it was that grey garment which he missed when it was not there. Poor faded, fluttering, nervous Cherry; he had always taken an interest in her; would she really have the courage to take this bold, independent step, and do the thing which not one of James Beresford's friends had dared to do?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOLY INQUISITION.

MISS CHERRY'S sudden arrival at the Square was a sudden surprise to everybody, and, like most surprises, was not quite successful for the moment. She arrived in the afternoon, when Cara was out with Mrs. Meredith, and when her appearance with her box excited no small astonishment among the servants, who were quite unprepared for a visitor. And Miss Cherry was nervous and self-conscious, feeling her mission in every nerve, though all the rest of the world remained unaware of what she had come to do. When she had seen her things deposited in the spare room, and had been served with the unfailing cup of tea in poor Annie's drawing-room, the sight of which, after so long, cost her some tears, she detained Nurse, who had brought this refreshment to her, to make what gentle preliminary investigations she could manage without exciting any suspicion.

'Is Miss Cara happy, do you think? Does she like being with her papa? It must be a great change to her, Nurse. Of course, a child ought to be happy with her father; but—and then to change all at once from the country, and at this time of the year. Oh, Nurse! I hope my dear child is happy. You know how she was thought of at the Hill,' said Miss Cherry, who was weeping-ripe, and scarcely could keep down the tears.

'Well, ma'am, for happy I can't say; but she keeps her 'elth,' said Nurse; 'that is what I've got most to do with. I don't think as there's much to brag of in the mornings, when she's here by herself. If I was master I'd get out of this house, Miss Cherry, and I'd pull this room to pieces, and change everything. That's why he can't abide to come in here. It's almost as bad as if my poor lady was a-lying here in state still, though it's five years and more since she was took from us. It's all as I can do myself to keep steady when I sees all her things, as she took such pride in; and master he can't stand it—and I don't wonder. But it ought to be changed. When the young gentlemen comes in, then Miss Cara brightens up——'

'The young gentlemen, Nurse?'

'The Mr. Merediths, ma'am, from next door. Mr. Edward has but just come back; but Mr. Oswald has been here regular, almost every day, and that cheers up a young lady——'

'But, Nurse——!' Cherry said, with a gasp, and could say no more.

'Yes, ma'am—I allow as it's running a risk,' said Nurse, very gravely; 'but what is a person to say? If there was a lady to take the charge—but master pays no attention. I don't think as he ever notices who comes and who goes.'

'But, oh! why didn't I know?' cried Cherry. 'Such a state of affairs ought not to have been permitted for a day.'

'No more it didn't ought to, Miss Cherry; but what can a person do? I've said a word now and again, when I've had an opportunity, about the deceitfulness of young men, and as how young ladies had best pay no heed to them—when I could, you know, ma'am. But whether them warnings is ever any good I'm not the one to say. A young lady like Miss Cara never thinks that it can be her as is meant. Even me, I can remember, though but a poor girl, it was always in my

mind, as I was the exception, and there couldn't be no question of deceiving with me.'

'Oh, deceiving!' said Cherry; 'that is not the question; but Cara is with her papa in the evenings? That must be a comfort to him, and to her too, poor child.'

Nurse gave a little cough. 'Master—mostly—spends the evening out,' she said.

Miss Cherry did not ask any more; her suspicions were all confirmed and her anxieties increased; for though there was no question of deceiving in Nurse's sense of the word, and though that good woman's homilies no doubt fell quite harmless upon Cara, yet the visits of a couple of young men to a girl 'almost every morning' conveyed an idea of danger which made Miss Cherry's hair stand on end. What the poor child had been plunged into the moment she left that safe feminine nest at the Hill, all flowery and sweet, where some kind guardian was always at hand! Launched into the world—never words could be more true. Miss Cherry sat in the haunted room, where poor Cara felt her mother's eyes upon her, so full of pondering that she had no leisure to be affected by that memory. The poor woman, who was dead and safe, died away out of all thoughts when the affairs of the living came uppermost—the living who were so far from being safe, whose life lay before them, liable to be coloured through and through by the events of any solitary moment. This could scarcely be said of James Beresford perhaps, whose life was three-parts over; but what penalties might not Cara have to pay for the pleasure of the moment!—the gay visitors who 'brightened her up' might leave darkness behind when their more active life carried them away to other scenes and occupations, and the companionship which made this opening of her existence cheerful might throw all the rest into shadow. So Miss Cherry, whose life knew nothing more than this, who had no varied experiences to show how one affection pushed out another, and on what lines of natural progress the course of life was drawn, thought to herself as she waited by the side of the fire, slowly sipping her cup of tea, for Cara's return. She thought no more of her brother and Mrs. Meredith—people who were old enough to manage their own concerns. Cara occupied all her thoughts. She was herself, though she was old, more on Cara's level of life than on that which was occupied by the kind neighbour for whom she had been so

anxious when she came. After a while she heard voices outside, and going to the window, saw a little group at the house next door, the centre of which was Mrs. Meredith herself, smiling graciously upon someone who had arrived too early for her usual reception, and who was going disappointed away, when stopped by her arrival. Behind Mrs. Meredith was Cara, looking up to a handsome, dark-haired young man, who smiled upon her in a way which gave even to old Miss Cherry's heart a sympathetic thrill. Surely he looked sincere, she said to herself; and what girl could resist such a look? For a moment Cherry forgot her terror and her precautions. Why should not Cara be the one happy girl whose happy love was to be blessed and sanctioned by everybody from the very beginning? Why should it not be so? Cherry asked herself. There was money enough in the family to make it possible to indulge this only child of their hearts in whatever she might please to want—a husband if she liked, or any other toy. It was not, however, with such light-minded expressions that Cherry treated so solemn a subject. If he loved her, and if she loved him, why should there be any difficulty? Cherry herself was ready to give up everything to 'secure' her darling's 'happiness.' These were the words to use:—'To secure Cara's happiness!' Then there need be no question of danger or trouble of any kind. The young couple would be married quite young, as it was for everybody's happiness (people said) to be, and there need be no further anxiety, no further pain, on Cara's account. They did not see her at the window, but stood talking, close together, the girl looking up, the young man looking down, until the door was opened, and they all disappeared. Cherry went back to her seat at the fireside and cried a little for pleasure at the thought of this happiness which was to come. To think of your child having precisely the blessedness, the good-fortune, which has not fallen to you, and which would have made you more happy than anything else,—could there be compensation more sweet? She cried for pleasure as she had cried before for anxiety, and sat with the firelight sparkling in that moisture which filled her eyes, and calculated how it could be done. Mrs. Meredith would allow her son something—as much at least as his school and university allowance, if not more; and though Aunt Charity was careful of her money, she could be liberal, too, on occasion. I am not sure even that it did not flash across Miss

Cherry's mind that one day the Hill and all its wealth would be her own; but she repulsed the thought with poignant compunction: unless, indeed, it might be that the Hill should go at once to Cara, and thus make her marriage, as of a queen-regnant able to endow her husband plentifully, the most wise and seemly thing in the world, even though she was so young. After all her troubles and terrors, Miss Cherry had a moment of exquisite pleasure as she sat by the fire and arranged it all. She forgot that the room was haunted, she forgot her sister-in-law's strange death, her brother's long misery, and now the consolation which he had found, and which all his friends disapproved of, and she herself had come here to put a stop to. What were all these things in comparison with Cara happy, Cara blessed in that best and sweetest lot which had never come to herself? What matter, if it came to her dearest child?

She had plenty of time to indulge these thoughts, for her dearest child was a long time coming, and but for her delightful dreams Miss Cherry might have felt somewhat dull and deserted in the still house. If she could but look through the partition and see into the drawing-room next door!—just a peep, to see her Cara with that charming young man beside her, bending over her. They were, like a pair in a novel, Miss Cherry felt, or in a poem, which was better still—she, with those great blue eyes, which were Cara's chief feature; he, dark and splendid, with a glow of manly colour. How nice that he should be so handsome! For indeed sometimes girls are quite pleased and happy with those who are not handsome, so that this was something *pardessus le marché*, an exceptional advantage. Someone began to play the piano after a while, and the sound came through the wall. Was it perhaps *he*? Cara could not play so well as that. If it was he, then he must be accomplished too, as well as handsome. What a happy, happy girl! Though Miss Cherry was a little tired of waiting before Cara came in, she had not at all flagged in her enthusiasm, and when the girl flew to her, all flushed and excited with pleasure at the sight of her, it was all she could do to restrain her congratulations and blessings. 'For I must not say a word till she gives me her confidence,' she said to herself.

'Nurse told me as she let me in that you were here. Oh, Aunt Cherry, how glad I am! When did you come? Why

did you not send for me? Here I have been waiting nearly an hour at Mrs. Meredith's, and you here!

'My darling, you were happier there——'

'Happier than with you? I was happier than when I am alone; but if I had known you were here! And, oh! Aunt Cherry, there is only time to get ready for dinner! We can't talk just now; how provoking it is! Tell me about Aunt Charity and home; but we must not keep dinner waiting.'

'No, dear. How pleased I am,' said Miss Cherry, kissing her child with tender fondness, 'to see you so considerate and careful of your papa's comfort?'

'Yes,' said Cara, doubtfully. 'Papa, of course—but it is more for cook and John; they don't like to have dinner kept waiting. Papa is often a little late himself, but of course no one could say anything to him.'

This explanation was made as they went upstairs arm-in-arm, the girl clinging to her aunt with pretty fondness, embracing Miss Cherry's arm with both her hands. Cara was paler than she had been at the Hill. Her eyes looked bigger and bluer than ever, her-transparent complexion more delicate and changeable. She was prettier than Miss Cherry had ever seen her, but 'did not look strong,' her anxious aunt thought. Was it the excitement of her position, the absorbing influence which had taken hold of her? How kind Cherry longed to take the child in her arms to beg for her confidence! 'But I must not say a word till she tells me,' she said to herself, with a sigh.

Mr. Beresford took his sister's arrival very calmly. He accepted her halting explanation of her sudden visit to town with the calm of indifference. When he had said he was glad to see her, had he not said all that was necessary? Miss Cherry's excuse was the dentist, that scourge yet blessing of middle-aged folks. And Cara, too, accepted the explanation with calmness though not with indifference. She led her back to the drawing-room after dinner with a light-hearted playfulness, unlike her usual gravity.

'How nice it is to have someone sitting opposite,' she said. 'Everything looks so cheerful to-night. And now we can talk.'

'Yes, Cara, as much as you please; and when your papa comes upstairs——'

'Oh, papa never comes upstairs, Aunt Cherry. He does

not like this room. Mrs. Meredith has made him come two or three times to try and get him used to it; but he never looks happy here.'

'Then you go down to the library and sit with him there?'

'Ought I to do that? He never said so, and I did not like to do it out of my own head. And then he goes out——'

'How lonely for you, my darling.'

'Yes, it is lonely. Sometimes I feel a little frightened. It is so quiet; listen!' said the girl, drawing nearer to her companion's side. 'I don't mind to-night when you are here; but there is not a sound—Cook and John shut all the doors to keep the house quiet for papa; but, oh! I should be so glad sometimes if I could hear them in the kitchen for company! I know it is very silly. Why should I be afraid? No one could come here but mamma, and she would never do harm to me, only good; and yet I feel sometimes as if I could not bear it. How is it, I wonder? This is London, and the Hill is the country; but one always heard something stirring there.'

'My dearest!' said kind Miss Cherry, crying over her; 'my own child! If I had known, if I could have thought you were left so much to yourself! But, dear, you see a great deal of the people next door. That must cheer you up: tell me about them. There is Mrs. Meredith—she used to be a very nice woman; are you fond of her, Cara? And then there are her sons——'

'Very fond,' said Cara, with composure; 'and the boys are kind. They come often in the morning to see me. I am not sure which of them I like best. Edward has just come home. He is the one that is going to India; and Oswald writes poetry and is very clever. I go out with Mrs. Meredith in the afternoon—you must not think I am not very fond of her, Aunt Cherry—but then she is fond of so many people. You should see her afternoons. She is at home always at five, and the number of people who come! and she looks at them all alike, and listens to them as if she thought of no one else. Yes, I am very fond of her; but I like people to belong to me, not to everybody—like you, Aunt Cherry; you are mine, mine!' the girl cried, with the flattery of exclusive appropriation which is so sweet to all, and especially to those who are beyond the first fascinations of life.

'Yes, my darling,' said Miss Cherry, with tears in her soft

eyes; 'me, and everything I have and everything I am, to do whatever you please with.' She had a right to be more lavish than any lover in her self-offering; for no love could have been so ready to give up will and wish, which are the last things any human creature likes to sacrifice, for the sake of the beloved. Miss Cherry would have allowed herself to be cut into little pieces at any moment, for the sake of the child.

But these were not the kind of confidences she expected. She made an effort to bring Cara back to the other ground, and to elicit from her some tender confession. Romantic old Cherry was disappointed not to have seen some trace of this confidence, irrepressible, eager to unbosom itself, but she was not hopeless of it still.

'I saw you go in,' she said. 'I watched you from the window, Cara. Was that one of the Merediths that was with you?—Very nice-looking, rather dark. Which was that? You seemed to be great friends.'

'This afternoon! Were you at the window? How stupid I was not to see you! I will never come near the house again without looking up at the windows. It was Oswald, Aunt Cherry; he is always the one who has time to go out with us. Do you think a man ought to have so much time? Yes, he is nice-looking, I think; he *is* like a poet; and he is the one who chiefly stands by me, and comes to see me in the morning. He never seems to have anything particular to do,' Cara added, with a slight air of vexation, which raised Miss Cherry's hopes.

'But if he writes?' she said, with a little awe.

'Ah, he does that at night; he sits up writing, and all day long he seems just to do what he likes. They laugh at him for it, but he never minds. Mrs. Meredith sometimes says—— Ah!' cried Cara, stopping short, and drawing a long sighing breath. A sort of muffled hollow sound went through the house—the shutting of the great hall-door, which seemed to vibrate upwards from floor to floor.

'What is it, Cara?' said Miss Cherry, whose nerves were weak, and who jumped at any noise, even when she knew really what it was.

'It is papa going out,' said Cara, with a little sigh; and then ensued a momentary silence, which showed that this mighty event was of importance to her and inspired her

imagination. 'But I do not mind to-night,' she added, with soft sudden laughter, putting her hands together with an infantile movement of pleasure, 'when I have you!'

They sat and talked the whole evening through, with that fertility of communication which exists between people who have very little to tell, and yet are in perfect confidence with each other. What did they say? not much of any consequence. Miss Cherry told Cara all the news of the Hill, and Cara confided to Miss Cherry without meaning, or being aware of it, a hundred small details of her life, chiefly repetitions of what she had already said, yet throwing fresh light upon those simple monotonous dull days, which were so interesting to the elder lady. But not all Miss Cherry's delicate leadings up to the point could win any confidential statement from the girl of the character her aunt had expected to hear. She was all confidence, and told everything without keeping back a thought; but there was nothing of this description to tell; and Miss Cherry was at last obliged to acknowledge it to herself with great disappointment. 'There has been no explanation yet,' she said to herself. She was not the first who has been disappointed by finding that a supposed romance had no existence. They sat quite late, till Miss Cherry, used to early hours, began to droop and get weary; but even after this feeling had crept over her eyes, and betrayed her into a yawn or two, she sat still, heroically waiting for her brother's return.

'When does your papa come in? Is he not late to-night?' she said at last, when her endurance had nearly reached its limits. She would have suffered any hardship for her darling, but the habits of her early innocent country life were strong upon her, and to stay up till midnight seemed almost immoral to Miss Cherry; still more immoral it seemed to her, however, to go to bed, without bidding your host good-night.

'I think he is always late; but no one waits up for him,' said Cara. 'I never see him after dinner. Have I tired you out talking? I go to bed early,' said the little girl, with a forlorn look, 'because it is so dull; but I am so happy to-night. Oh, I wish you would never go away any more.'

'My darling, I thought you had a great deal better company than me.'

'Ah, but you were mistaken, you see. Sometimes I have very nice company though, when we dine with the Merediths.'

She asks us every week, and sometimes I go out to parties with her, which are pleasant. But it is very dull the other nights,' said Cara, with unconscious pathos; 'and the only thing I can do to amuse myself is to go to bed.'

She laughed, but it was not a cheerful laugh. And was it possible that on the other side of the partition her father was sitting, whose poor little daughter had nothing better to do to amuse herself than to go to bed? What could James mean by such conduct? It was very hard for Cherry to be just in such strange circumstances, and not to blame, as most people would have done, the woman who was concerned. Visions of ill-names, such as 'elderly siren,' which innocent Miss Cherry had read in the papers, drifted into her simple brain in spite of herself. Why did she let him do it? Why did she encourage him to go to her? What were they talking about? Miss Cherry, though she was so sleepy, could not really rest, even after she went to bed, till she heard once more that dull sound through the house of the great door shutting. The houses in the Square were well built for London houses, and the corresponding sounds in the house next door, when the visitor departed, did not reach the watcher's ears. But it was with some anxiety in her thoughts that Miss Cherry wondered how the sons liked it, and what they thought of their mother's constant visitor: and she a married woman: and James still making believe to feel his wife's loss so deeply that he could not enter his drawing-room without pain! Miss Cherry blushed in the darkness, throwing a warm reflection upon the pillow, if there had been any light to show it, over this thought.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PERUGINO.

OSWALD MEREDITH had a new direction given to his thoughts. He was not, as may be easily divined, so clever as Cara gave him credit for being, nor, indeed, as his family supposed, who knew him better than Cara did; but he was full of fancy and a kind of gay, half-intellectual life which might be called poetic so far as it went. His head was full of the poets, if not of poetry; and a certain joyous consciousness of existence and

of well-being which made his own pursuits and enjoyments beautiful and important to him, was in all he did and said. He was not so much selfish as self-occupied, feeling a kind of glory and radiance about his youth, and conscious freedom and conscious talents which elated him, without any absolute vanity or self-love. Naturally all the people who were equally self-occupied, or whose temperaments ran counter to Oswald's, took it for granted that he was vain and selfish; and those who loved him best were often impatient with him for this happy contentment, which made him pleased with his own aimless ways, and indifferent to everything that demanded any exertion which would interfere with the smooth current of his enjoyable and enjoying life. For himself he was too good-natured to criticise or find fault with anyone—having no ideal himself to derange his satisfaction with his own circumstances and behaviour, he had no ideal for others, and was quite content that they, too, should enjoy themselves as they pleased, and find each for himself the primrose paths which suited him best; but he did not inquire into the primrose paths of others. He was so pleased with his own, so ready to tell everybody how delightful it was, how he enjoyed it, what pretty fancies it abounded in, and pleasant intercourse, and merry sunshiny ways. For Edward, who worked, he had the kindest toleration, as for an odd fellow who found his pleasure that way; and his mother, who sympathised with everybody, he regarded also with half-laughing, satisfied eyes as one whose peculiar inclinations laid her open to a charge of 'humbug,' which, perhaps, was not quite without foundation. Let everybody follow their own way: that was the way in which, of course, they found most pleasure, he said to himself, and in the lightness of his heart had no idea of any other rule. Cara had brought in a new and very pleasant element into his life; he liked to go to her and tell her what he was doing and receive that ready sympathy which was to him something like the perfume of flowers—a thing for which it was quite unnecessary to make any return, but which was delightful to receive, and which added a something more exquisite and delicate to the very atmosphere in which this young demi-god lived, caressed by gods and men. What more could he do for Cara or anyone but communicate his own satisfaction to her, make her a sharer in the pleasure he felt in himself and his life? He was 'very fond' of Cara. He

would not, for a moment, have permitted anyone to take her companionship and sympathy from him. To tell Cara, was not that the first thing that occurred to him when anything happened, any new gratification or success? As for hearing from her in return what thoughts came into her little head, what happened in her quiet life—that did not occur to Oswald. To talk of himself seemed so much more natural and so much more interesting, to Cara as well as to himself. Was it not really so? He was a man, three-and-twenty, at the very most triumphant period of life, free to go anywhere he pleased, to do anything he liked, strong, clever, handsome, sufficiently rich. Could any circumstances be more delightful, more satisfactory? No woman, let alone a little girl, without freedom of action, could be so well off, so consciously at the 'high top-gallant' of mortal pleasantness. The sense of this suffused, so to speak, his whole being. It was not selfishness, any more than happiness is selfishness; there was even a kind of spontaneous unconscious gratitude in it for all the pleasant things in his lot.

It was with this feeling strong in his mind that he had walked along the streets the day of the accident to the little school-girl. It had been just his luck to meet with a true Perugino face. Little processions of school-children are the commonest things in the world, but you might have passed a hundred of them before you came upon anything like the soft Umbrian glow of that complexion, that tender roundness of the soft form, the devout, sweet eyes. The incident itself, it was true, was something of a break upon the general felicity; but Oswald was able to hope that the little girl whom he had carried with the utmost care and kindness to the hospital, with a sympathetic pallor on his handsome face, would turn out to be not so much hurt, or at least would mend rapidly and be none the worse. He felt very sorry for the poor little thing, yet felt there was a certain luck in the accident, for otherwise he could only have looked at the Perugino, not spoken to her as he did now. He found out the name of the house to which she belonged, and asked permission of the Sister who had been in charge of the procession to go and inquire for the little sufferer. 'Alas, I am afraid for a long time inquiries must be made at the hospital,' she said, but gave him her name, Sister Mary Jane, with natural pleasure in the kindness of so handsome a young man, and one who

looked so *comme il faut*, so thoroughly a gentleman. It is just as good in an ugly and common person to be kind, but somehow nobody thinks so, and Oswald's anxiety to hear of the child's progress seemed exceptional virtue in the mind even of the good Sister. 'Never say the upper classes are indifferent to other people's welfare,' said Sister Mary Jane. 'I don't believe a working man could have shown half so much feeling.' And young Agnes, the teacher, said nothing against this, but admired secretly and wondered why he had looked at her so, and whether by any chance they might ever meet again. Oswald, for his part, went away from the hospital with his head full of that new 'poem' which he had begun on the spot even before the *rapprochement* of the accident—

From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
Fair face!——

That was all the length he got; he discarded the other line and a half which I have already recorded, and went about all day saying over that 'fair face!' to himself. It made a suggestive break in the verse which was delightful to him, and gave him a point of pleasure the more—pleasure, and piquant suggestion of other sweetness to come.

Next day he went, as he felt it his duty to do, to the hospital to inquire for the child; and in the waiting-room he found to his wonder and delight the Perugino herself, waiting meekly for news, but accompanied by a somewhat grim personage who would have been the lay-sister of a Roman Catholic sisterhood, but whom Oswald did not know (nor do I) how to classify in the spick and span new conventual system of Anglicanism. She kept apart with humility, but she kept her eye from under the poke-bonnet fixed upon the young lady whom she attended, so that Oswald was able to exchange only a few words with her. The little girl had her leg broken; which was very serious; but she had passed a good night and was going on well; which was more cheerful and restored the smiles to the young faces of the inquirers, to whom it was further intimated that on a certain day her friends might be admitted to see the little patient. 'Oh, thanks! I will come,' cried Agnes; and then she explained, with a blush, that poor little Emmy was an orphan and had no friends out of the 'House.' 'But everybody is fond of her there,' she added. Perhaps it was the coming in of some new feeling into his

mind that made Oswald as effusive and sympathetic as his mother herself could have been. 'Then God bless the House,' he said, 'for taking such care of the friendless.' Agnes looked at him gratefully with humid eyes.

'Then you are not one of the people who disapprove of it?' she said. 'Indeed, they do things there we could not do staying at home.'

'Ah,' said Oswald, with a smile, 'I can see you are wanted to stay at home—and I don't wonder.'

The girl shrank back a little. 'I am not a Sister,' she said, with youthful dignity. 'I am not good enough. I only teach. We must go back now.'

He stood aside, with his hat in his hand, to let them pass, and even the lay Sister, not used to courtesies, was moved by the politeness in which her humble person had a share. 'I never saw a more civil-spoken gentleman,' she said as they went towards the 'House.' Agnes in her private heart felt that he was more than a civil-spoken gentleman. How tenderly he had carried the child, and how good it was to take the trouble of going to inquire after her; and what kind enthusiasm was in his face when he bade God bless the 'House' for taking care of the friendless. Ah, that was how it ought to be thought of! The bread and butter of the little orphans was somehow more noble than that bread and butter which had disgusted her at home when all her little brothers and sisters were squabbling for it, and mamma scolding the elder girls for letting them make such a noise, and the whole house filled with insubordination and confusion. Her work now was more satisfactory, and Louisa, who did not mind, and who scolded back again when there was scolding going on, was quite enough for all that was wanted; but still Agnes felt very glad that 'the gentleman' had set her present life before her thus anew as help to the friendless. In reality, taking the facts of the case, it was always the bread and butter, though that was noble when given to orphans and the friendless, which was but commonplace when dispensed to one's brothers and sisters. Yet life, take it how you will, in a vulgarish common Rectory, full of children, or in a 'House' devoted to the help of one's fellow-creatures, is an unheroic sort of affair at the best. There is no making up to that ideal that flies from you further and further as life goes on. Does not everything turn into commonplace as one's hands touch

it, as one executes it, the great imagination gliding ever further and further off, mocking you from the skies? So Agnes felt as she went back to the House to go on with the lessons of the little orphans, in their somewhat dingy school-room, all the afternoon.

As for Oswald he pursued his walk, more and more delighted with this new adventure.

From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung,
The gentle form disclosing to my heart,
Of that dear image, sweet and fair and young,
Image beloved of art;
Which in all ages represents the dream
Of all perfection——

Here he broke down; there was nothing fitly rhyming to 'dream' which would suit his subject, unless it was something about a 'wondrous theme,' which would be commonplace. Here accordingly he stuck, with other monosyllables rushing about hopelessly in his head, in the pleased excitement of a rhymester with a new source of inspiration. Better than staying at home! What would be better than staying at home would be to take this Perugino away to see the other Peruginos in the world, to carry her off to the loveliest places that could be thought of, to wander with her alone by riversides and in green woods and by summer seas. Italy! that would be better than staying at home, better than the 'House' with its orphans. Such an idea as this had never crossed Oswald's mind before. He had thought that he had been in love—indeed, he was in love (was not he?) with Cara even now, and could not be content without her sympathy. But never before had he felt it necessary to think of the other, of the individual he was in love with, first before himself. Now, however, that it had come to him to do this, he did it in his characteristic way. How sweet it would be to carry her off from all these vulgar scenes, to show her everything that was beautiful, to show himself to her as the very source of felicity, the centre of everything! A teacher in a charity school, of course she was poor. He would like to make her rich, to clothe her beautifully, to give her the half of all his own delights. How sweet it would be! and how grateful she would be, and how those liquid brown eyes would look, full of eloquent thanks! He laughed at himself as he went on. Why, this was something new, another delight added to the

pleasures of his life, a delight of generosity which he had never known before. To be sure it was all in imagination, but is not imagination the better part of life?

On the visitors' day Oswald went back again to the hospital, and found out there exactly the length of time that the visitors were allowed to stay. She would remain to the last, he felt sure, to comfort the little patient. And his plan was successful. At the last moment, when the doors were almost closing, she came running through the great hall, apologising to the porter for being so late, the ladyhood of her light figure and soft step showing very distinctly after the crowd of good, honest, anxious women, mothers or wives of the patients, who had come out before her. Agnes was by herself, for the 'House' was not far off, and her dress was a sufficient protection to her. It was not a protection, however, against Oswald, who came eagerly up with a pretence of being just too late to inquire, which delighted himself as the cleverest expedient. 'How is she?' he asked quite anxiously, and Agnes gave her report with the greatest gravity. The little girl was making quite satisfactory progress. She was very well cared for, and quite comfortable, though she had cried when her visitor left her. 'That was not so wonderful,' Agnes said seriously, 'for I was like a sight of home to her, you know.'

'I don't think it was at all wonderful,' said Oswald, 'with equal gravity. 'Had it been me I should have cried too.'

She looked at him suspiciously, with rising colour; but Oswald looked innocence itself. He went on quietly walking by her side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. 'Are your pupils all orphans,' he asked, 'or are others received?' with the air of a philanthropist who had troops of poor children to dispose of. This was what Agnes thought, and the 'House' was in want of funds, as where is the 'House' that is not? She answered with some eagerness:

'I think if they have lost one parent—I know we have widows' children; and they are very glad if kind people will send children to be paid for,' she said. 'But perhaps that was not what you meant?'

'I have not got any children to send; but I should like to subscribe to such an excellent institution. Charities are often

so unsatisfactory,' he said in his most solemn tone, with a gravity which was sublime.

'Yes, I suppose so,' she said doubtfully. 'I do not know very much about charities, but I am sure the Sisters would be very glad; they have more to do than they have money for, I know. They are always wanting to do more.'

'I suppose I might send my offering,' said Oswald clumsily, 'to Sister Mary Jane?' Then he paused, perceiving a further advantage. 'If you will kindly show me where the convent is, I will see her at once.'

'It is close by,' said Agnes—then looked at him again, with a shade of doubt on her face. He was not like the sort of person to visit Sister Mary Jane; still if he brought subscriptions, had she any right to stop him? She went along by his side for another moment, demure and quiet. As for Oswald, between his terror of awakening her suspicions and his desire to laugh at his own dissimulation, his usual readiness quite failed him. He, too, walked by her as grave as a judge. He dared not look at her lest he should laugh, and he dared not laugh lest he should destroy his chances once and for all.

'I have seen convents abroad,' he said at last, 'but none in England. Forgive my curiosity; are the same rules observed? Is there a Lady Superior, Abbess, or Prioress, or——, don't be angry with me if I show my ignorance.'

'I never was abroad,' said Agnes. 'There is a Sister Superior, that is all.'

'Then I suppose the Abbesses exist only in books,' he said, with an insinuating smile.

'I have not read many books.' Then she thought she was perhaps uncivil to a man who was coming with a subscription. 'Papa did not approve of light books, and I have not much time for reading now.'

'You have not been there long? Is the routine severe? Don't think I am asking from mere curiosity,' said Oswald; 'indeed I have a motive in wishing to know.'

'Oh, no, not severe; there is a great deal to do. We have to attend to all the children. If you are fond of children it is not at all hard; but what one wishes for is to be quiet sometimes,' said Agnes. 'That is not so easy when the place is so full.'

'Ah! I know a girl who has too much quiet, who would like to be in a full house and hear other people's voices.'

'Lots are very different in this world,' said Agnes, with gentle wisdom; 'one cannot tell which to choose; the only safe thing is to do one's best; to aim at something good.'

'Or to make the best of what we have,' said Oswald.

A flush of sudden colour came to her face. 'It is surely best to aim at something above us,' she said, with some confusion; 'just to be content cannot be the highest good, if what we have by nature is nothing but what others can do just as well; is not that a reason for taking the matter into one's own hands and trying something better?'

Special pleading! He could see in her eyes, in her every expression, that this was her own case which she was arguing with such warmth, and that indeed there was some doubt in her mind as to this highest idea which she had followed. And in the fervour of the self-argument she had forgotten that she did not know him, and that he had no right to be walking thus familiarly by her side.

'The worst is,' he said, 'that when we follow an ideal, the result is sometimes disappointment. Have you not found it so?'

She blushed very deeply, and cast a wondering glance up at him, astonished at his penetration. 'I did not say so,' she cried. 'I am not disappointed—only one did not think of all the details. Real things are never so beautiful as things are in your imagination, that is all.'

'Is it always so?' he said, stealing always a little further on. 'For then this world would be a sadly unsatisfactory place, and life would not be worth living.'

'Ah, everybody says so,' cried Agnes; 'that is what I always rebel against. Because one thing disappoints you, why should everything? They say the world is so bad, all full of delusion; but God made it—it cannot be so bad if we took pains enough to find out what is best.'

Oswald's heart was touched; by the eagerness in her face and the beauty of its dimples—but a little by the contrast between this young creature's abstract purpose and his own want of any purpose at all. 'I am not good enough to keep up such an argument,' he said ingenuously enough; 'I am afraid I am content to get along just as it happens from day to day. You make me blush for myself.'

When he said this an overpowering blush covered the face which was turned towards him under the poke-bonnet. 'Oh,

what have I been saying?' she cried, crimson with shame and compunction. How she had been talking to a stranger, a man, a person whose very name she did not know! What would the Sisters say, what would mamma say if she knew? Would not this heinous offence against all the proprieties prove everything they had ever said against her independent outset in the world? And he, what could he think? Agnes wished the pavement might open and swallow her up—as it had done once or twice before at very great crises of history. She could not run away from him, that would be a worse folly still, especially as the 'House' was already in sight. But she shrank away from him as far as the narrow pavement would permit, and did not dare to look at him again.

'You have said nothing but what it was good to say,' he said hurriedly. 'Do not be angry with yourself for having spoken to me. I am not unworthy of it. It will do me good, and it cannot have harmed you. I do not even know your name'—here he made a slight pause, hoping she might tell him—'mine is Oswald Meredith. I am not much good, but if anything could make me better it would be hearing what you have said. Life is perhaps too pleasant to me—and I don't take thought enough of what is best; but I will think of you and try,' said Oswald, with a little innocent, honest, natural hypocrisy. He meant it for the moment though he did not mean it. A little glow of virtuous feeling rose in his breast. Yes, to be sure, he, too, would think of what was best in life and do it—why not? it would be good and right in itself, and agreeable to her. To be sure he would do it. The resolution was very easy and gave him quite a warm glow of virtue and goodness. He had no secret wickedness to give up, or struggles with favourite vices to look forward to. He would be good, certainly, and made up his mind to it with all the bland confidence and light-hearted certainty of a child.

And then he went across the street to the 'House' and put down his name for such a subscription as made the heart leap within the sober bosom of Sister Mary Jane.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CONFIDENCE.

'CARA, I want to tell you something,' said Oswald. 'Look here; here is a comfortable chair. Never mind your aunt; my mother will take care of her. I never have you now, not for half a minute. If I were not in love with her, I should hate your aunt—she is always there. I never can manage to say a word to you.'

This was said in Mrs. Meredith's drawing-room after dinner. Of course it is needless to say that Mrs. Meredith, apprised of Miss Cherry's arrival, had immediately done her part of neighbourly and friendly kindness by asking her to dinner at once.

'Never! She has been here two days,' said Cara.

'Two days is a very long time, especially when new thoughts are coming into one's mind, and new resolutions. I think we are all too worldly-minded, Cara. Life is a more serious thing than you and I have been thinking. A great revolution has occurred in my thoughts.'

'Oh, Oswald! you have been hearing some great preacher; he has made you think? Who was it? I have so often heard of things like that. It must be my fault,' said Cara, piteously; 'it never has any effect upon me—but perhaps I never heard anyone good enough.'

'That is it,' said Oswald. 'It was not a preacher, but someone I met casually. I have made up my mind to be a great deal more in earnest—much more serious.'

'Oh, Oswald! I am so glad! That was all you wanted to make you very, very nice—quite what one wished.'

'So you did not think me very, very nice, Cara? I flattered myself you did like me. For my part, I never criticised you, or thought anything wanting. You were Cara—that was enough for me. I should have liked to think that simply because I was Oswald——'

'So it was! If I had not liked you because you were Oswald, should I ever have ventured to say *that* to you?' asked Cara, with a little indignation. 'But you may be very fond of people, and yet see that something would make

them still nicer. How happy your mother will be—and Edward——’

‘Edward may go to Jericho!’ said Oswald, with some indignation. ‘What right has he to set himself up as a judge of his elder brother? I can see with the back of my head that he is watching us now, and furious because I am talking to you. You are too gentle, Cara, and have too much consideration for him. A boy like that should be kept in his place—not but that he’s a very good fellow when you don’t bring him forward too much. I wrote a little thing last night that I want to read to you. Shall you be alone at twelve to-morrow if I come in? Do something with Aunt Cherry; send her out shopping—all ladies from the country have shopping to do; or to her dentist, if that is what she has come to town for, poor dear old soul. But anyhow be alone, Cara, to-morrow. I want your opinion of my last poem. The subject is a face that I met by accident in the street—a complete Perugino, as if it had stepped out of a picture; though I don’t know which it resembles most—one of the angels in that great picture in the Louvre, or a Madonna somewhere else—but such colour and such sentiment! I want to read them to you, and to hear what you think.’

‘Yes, Oswald; but tell me about this other thing, this change in your mind.’

‘It is all the same thing; my heart is full of it. You think me mysterious; but I can’t talk freely to-night with all these people so close round us. Listen, Cara,’ he said, approaching his face close to hers, and speaking in a half-whisper of profoundest confidentiality—‘Listen, I want your sympathy. I think I have arrived at a crisis in my life.’

This little group was watched by more than one pair of eyes, and with very varied feelings. The party consisted of Mr. Beresford, Miss Cherry, and that old friend of the Meredith family, who attended all Mrs. Meredith’s receptions, Mr. Sommerville. And of all the spectators Mr. Beresford was perhaps the only one who did not cast a glance and a thought towards the two young people so distinctly isolating themselves from the rest in their corner. Mr. Sommerville looked at them with a sort of chuckle, reflecting that, as the only child of her father, Cara was no doubt well worth the trouble; and that, at this moment at least, the idle Oswald was not losing his time. Mrs. Meredith glanced at them with a soft pride and sympathetic pleasure in what she considered her son’s

happiness; a pleasure unmarred by the thought that her other son was rendered anything but happy by this spectacle. But the two whose minds were absorbed by the scene, and who scarcely could even make a pretence of attending to anything else, were Miss Cherry and Edward Meredith. Poor Edward sat behind backs with a book in his hand, but he never turned over the leaf. All that he was capable of seeing for the moment was his brother's shoulders, which were turned to him, and which almost shut out the view of Cara, who was sitting on a little sofa fitted into a corner, separated entirely from the rest of the party by Oswald, who sat in front of her, with his back turned to the others, leaning forward to talk to her. More than the habitual suppressed sense that his brother was preferred to him in everything was the feeling in Edward's mind now. This time he was disappointed as well as wounded. Edward had been more light-hearted, more self-confident, than he had ever been known to be in his life before, since the conversation with Cara which has been recorded in this history. He had thought then that at last he had found someone who was capable of judging between Oswald and himself, and of understanding that all the good was not on one side. When Cara had spoken of the difference between those who talked of themselves, and those whose minds were open to the troubles of others, Edward's heart had danced with sudden pleasure. She had made the unfailing comparison between them which Edward felt everybody to make, and she had not thrown herself, as most of the world did (he thought), entirely on Oswald's side. Alas, poor Edward! what was he to think now? He sat and watched with indescribable feelings while this little scene arranged itself, feeling it intolerable, yet incapable of doing anything to prevent it. Had her feelings changed, then, or had she only spoken so to please him, not meaning it; adopting the doubtful practice—very doubtful, though St. Paul seems to recommend it—of being all things to all men? Edward suffered sometimes from seeing his mother do this; must he find the same in *her* too? The thought was bitter to him. With his book held, he did not know how, in his hands, he watched the pair. Oswald bent forward close to her, talking low, so that she only could hear, shutting out the rest of the people in the room, the rest of the world, how many soever and how important they might have been, appropriating her altogether to himself;

and Cara yielded to it, and smiled, and showed no displeasure. Could this mean anything but one thing? Perhaps some passing lovers' quarrel had disturbed the equilibrium of affairs between them, when she spoke to Edward as she had done, and raised his hopes. Perhaps—— But why speculate on anything so little encouraging? It threw him down, as it were, at a plunge from those airy and lovely heights of youthful possibility, where Oswald had always preceded him, gleaned everything that was most desirable. It seemed to Edward that he had never cared for anything in his life but Cara—her 'sweet friendship,' as the young man called it, the appreciation and understanding of him which he had read in her eyes. Surely the elder brother who had all the success and all the social happiness for his portion might have spared him this. It was the rich man and the poor man over again. Oswald was welcome to anything but Cara; and yet he had come out of his way to pluck this one flower which Edward had hoped might be for him. His heart sank as he watched them, down, down, to unimaginable depths. Oswald would not care for her as he would have done. She would but be a pleasure the more to the elder brother, whereas to Edward she would have been everything. No doubt he was talking to her now of himself, his own prowess, and what he had done or was going to do. Herself and how she was feeling would drop as things unworthy consideration; but Edward would have made them the chief, the most interesting topics—he would have forgotten himself to set her high above all others. Was this the way of the world, of which so much was written in books and sung in poetry? The book trembled in Edward's hand, and his heart suddenly swelled and filled with a sick and bitter discontent.

As for Miss Cherry, she was at the opposite point of the compass. She forgot her terrors, forgot her troubles, in pleasure at that most consoling of sights. Her gentle soul floated in a very sea of soft reflected happiness. Never to her had come that delight of youth. Dreams had been her portion all her life; perhaps disappointment, perhaps only the visionary suspense of waiting for something which never came; but to see before her eyes her dearest child reaping the harvest of her own silent wishes! Was not that almost a better portion than being happy in her own person? Cherry forgot to talk, and made only a rambling reply when addressed, so much

was her heart absorbed in the 'young people.' She thought that now surely Cara would tell her, and that she would take the child into her arms and cry over her, and rejoice in her. Better than happiness of her own! Her own happiness (Miss Cherry reflected), had she got it, would have been half worn out by this time—waning, perhaps faded by time. Whereas, the deferred blessedness which Cara would enjoy instead of her would be fresh as any flower, and fill all hearts with joy. She sat at the corner of the fire opposite, saying 'God bless them,' over and over, and working out in her mind all kinds of calculations about money, and how much they would begin on, and where they should live. For Miss Cherry was resolved that Cara should not be balked of her happiness. On that point she would be firm as a rock. If the young man had not very much, what did that matter so long as they loved each other, and Cara had plenty? And Cara should have plenty, however anyone might oppose or obstruct. God bless them! All the happiness that should have been hers, and their own in addition—that was what she wished for this happy, happy, happy pair; and so sat there, taking no share in the conversation, making answers so far from the mark that lively old Mr. Sommerville set her down as a very stupid person, and even Mrs. Meredith, who was kind in her judgment of everybody, could not help thinking that Cherry had grown duller with years.

All this happened because Oswald Meredith, having arrived, as he said, at a crisis in his life, and being one of the people to whom a confidante is needful, had chosen to elect Cara, with whom up to the time of meeting his Peruginio Agnes he had been half in love, to that office—so easily are people deceived—not a soul in the room could have believed it possible that the love which he was whispering in Cara's ear was love for somebody else; nor indeed, so limited were the communications which were possible with so many people close about them, had Cara herself any clear idea on the subject. That he had something to tell her was certain, and she had almost pledged herself to get Aunt Cherry out of the way, and see him alone next day, to receive his confidence. And no fluttering of Cara's heart, no reluctance to give this promise, or excitement about the explanation, complicated the matter as far as she was concerned. The two who gave rise to all these speculations—to the misery in Edward's heart, and

the joy in Miss Cherry's—were the two calmest people in the room, and the least occupied by this interview which had made them the observed of all observers. After a while, Mrs. Meredith called to Cara (with a little compunction at disturbing Oswald in his happiness; but for the moment that very evident exhibition of it had lasted long enough, the kind mother thought) and made her come out of her corner and sing. And Oswald went with her to the piano, where the lights were dim as usual, and where her sweet floating young voice rose up, not too loud nor too much in the centre of everything, the very luxury of drawing-room performances. The elder people might talk if they were so disposed without disturbing the singer, or might stop and listen when a high pure tone floated upward like a bird into the skies, and enjoy the momentary ecstasy of it without formal attention to every bar. She sang, 'If he upbraid' and 'Bid me discourse,' those twin melodies; and those flowing fragments of the divine Ariel, which seem to breathe fragrance as well as sweetness to the ear. Miss Cherry knew the songs by heart; had she not played the accompaniments till her fingers ached, and 'practised' them over and over, till the young voice got familiar with them to that height of delicious perfection? But she sat and listened now as if she had never heard them before—asking herself was there not a sweeter, more exquisite tone, born of love and happiness, in Cara's voice. As for Edward, poor fellow, he never budged from his seat, and never put down his book—of which, however, he had not read a line. She was Oswald's now and not his. He did not know why it was that this disappointment, this desertion gave him so deep a pang; for he had not been thinking about love, nor had he any experience in it. One more had gone over to Oswald's side; but somehow the whole world on Edward's did not feel as if it could balance that one. Why should he listen to those notes that seemed to tear his heart? He would have done all that for Cara that her song declared her ready to do—was it for Oswald?—answered her upbraiding with unresentful smiles, and thought her looks, however angry, to be like morning roses washed in dew. All that he could have done—but it was Oswald these looks were for, and not for him. Poor boy! he sat with his book before his face, paying no attention, as it seemed, but hearing and seeing everything. And at the end of every

song came a little murmur of their voices as they consulted what the next was to be—the prettiest group! he stooping over her, finding her music for her—and the gleam of the candles on the piano making a spot of light about her pretty head and white dress. But Edward would not look, though he seemed to have a picture of them painted upon the blackest of backgrounds in his heart.

Miss Cherry was so led astray from the object of her special mission that she scarcely observed that her brother lingered behind them when they left, and in the flurry of finding Oswald at her side as they went down the steps of one house and up the steps of the other, no very lengthened pilgrimage—overlooked altogether the fact that Mr. Beresford had stayed behind. Her heart was beating far more tumultuously than Cara's, which, indeed, was calm enough, as they went upstairs. The lights were out in the drawing-room, and the two went up to Miss Cherry's room, where the fire was burning cheerfully. Cara stood before the fire with her little white cloak dropping from her shoulders, and the ruddy glow warming her whiteness, the very image and type of exquisite half-childish maidenhood to the kind eyes which saw her through such soft tears.

'Oh, my darling!' said Miss Cherry, 'surely you will tell me now? I don't want to thrust myself into your confidence, Cara. I have not said a word, though I have been thinking of nothing else; but oh, my sweet! after to-night you will surely tell me now.'

Miss Cherry had moisture in her eyes. She was breathless and panting with eagerness and with the hurry of running upstairs. The colour went and came as if she had been the heroine of the romance—and indeed she looked a great deal more like the heroine of a romance than Cara did, who turned upon her, calm but wondering, the serenity of her blue eyes.

'Tell you what, Aunt Cherry? Of course I will tell you everything that happens; but what is there to tell?'

'You don't expect me to be blind,' said Miss Cherry, almost crying in her disappointment; 'what I see with my own eyes I can't be deceived in. And do you think I am so stupid or so old, or, oh, Cara! so indifferent, as not to see everything that concerns my darling's happiness? You cannot do me such injustice as that.'

‘But what is it that concerns my happiness?’ said the girl, with a tranquil smile. ‘Did anything happen that I don’t know of? I don’t know anything about it, for my part.’

Miss Cherry paused and looked at her with something like offended dignity. ‘Cara, this is not like you,’ she said. ‘Did not I see him following you about everywhere—shutting you up in the corner to talk to you? Ah, my dear, nothing can deceive anxious eyes like mine! And there is no harm in it that you should hesitate to tell me. I should be only too happy to know, and so would Aunt Charity, that you had escaped all the uncertainties of life by an early suitable marriage—a marriage of pure love.’

‘Marriage!’ Cara’s face grew crimson; and the word came forth faltering in a tremor, half of shame, half of laughter. ‘Aunt Cherry, what can you be thinking of? There is nothing, nothing of the kind—oh, would you believe that I could do such a thing? There! You were only laughing at me.’

‘Cara, I never, never laugh on such subjects. They are far, far too important and serious. A girl’s whole future might be ruined by getting frightened or laughing at the wrong time. Oh, my Cara, don’t take it too lightly! If Oswald Meredith has not asked you, it is only for want of an opportunity: perhaps he thought it too public to-night, and so it was. I should not have liked him to ask you to-night,’ said Miss Cherry, reassuring herself. ‘It was not private enough. But he will do it the first opportunity; of that I am as sure as that I’m living. Didn’t he ask you—he must have asked you—to see him to-morrow?’

‘Aunt Cherry, you are mistaken. I know you are mistaken,’ said Cara, growing as pale as she had been red. The bow drawn at a venture had flown straight to the very red. ‘Indeed, indeed,’ she faltered, ‘I assure you he doesn’t mean anything of the sort.’

‘He asked you to see him to-morrow?’ said Miss Cherry, delighted by her success.

‘He asked me, certainly, if I would be at home to-morrow; but he often does—he often comes. Aunt Cherry, do believe me. It is not that, not that at all, whatever it is.’

‘My dearest,’ said Miss Cherry, with great dignity, ‘I know how people look when that is what is in their minds. You think I have had no experience, and so many people suppose.

One does not brag of such things. But, Cara, I hope you will not allow yourself to be taken by surprise as—well, as I was. I sometimes think if I had only had someone to say to me “dear”—Miss Cherry went on, with fresh tears coming into her mild eyes—“you should think a great deal, and be very sure of your own feelings before you spoil a young man’s life for him.” A girl does that sometimes out of simple want of thought, and because she is startled. I could tell you of such a thing happening—and how I—she was sorry after, but never had it in her power to mend it. Oh, Cara, my darling, it is a very serious thing to spoil another’s life!’

‘Aunt Cherry! but you are wrong. I am quite sure you are wrong,’ said Cara, trembling. She could not help feeling a certain awe at the idea of this sudden power which seemed to be thrust into her hands; and yet it was too incredible to affect her profoundly. ‘Oswald is not like that,’ she said, ‘even if he meant it. He is not so serious, he does not feel so strongly.’ But then Cara herself paused, uncertain, thinking of the revolution in his thoughts of which he had told her, the crisis in his life.

‘Ah, Cara, even while you are speaking to me your view changes—you see the truth of what I say. Oh, think of it, my dear, and pray to God to direct you. It is not a thing to laugh about, as so many people do. Good-night, my darling, good-night! I must not talk any more, or I shall say more than I want to say, and it ought to be all left to your own feelings. Run away, run away, my own child, and think it over and judge for yourself.’

Cara withdrew with a little nervous shiver, drawing her cloak round her. The seriousness of this appeal overawed the girl. That she should plunge out of her almost childhood into this serious crisis, upon which so much depended, seemed incredible. She had scarcely turned away from the door when Miss Cherry put out her head again.

‘Cara, just one word. If there should be difficulties, I will stand by you. You shall not be crossed in anything that is for your happiness. We have plenty for you both. Good-night, my darling, good-night.’

This did not ease Cara’s mind as Miss Cherry intended, but only bewildered her. She stood for a moment wondering, till the door was closed again and her aunt disappeared. What did she mean? Difficulties to be surmounted which could

make it comforting to know that there was plenty for both had not occurred to Cara's mind, which indeed went not a step beyond the present dilemma. Could it be true? Awe, wonder, fright, contended in her mind with a suppressed sense of amusement which Cara thought wicked. Could Oswald feel so gravely, so deeply as Aunt Cherry thought? It did not seem possible; and could it be homely Cara who was the object of so serious a sentiment? Her little head seemed to go round and round as she tried to think. She dropped upon the hearthrug before the fire, kneeling, putting out her small hands to the warmth. Emotion is always chilly, and the effort of thinking upon such a wonderful subject made Cara shiver. She began to put things together, to remember the unusual warmth with which Mrs. Meredith embraced her, the strange look Edward gave her. When she remembered Edward's look Cara grew colder than ever, and felt disposed to cry, she could not tell why. That, then, was what they all believed, not Aunt Cherry alone, who was romantic, but everybody—and poor Edward! Cara felt a sudden pang go through her heart. Why did Edward look at her so seriously, so pitifully? Was it only sympathy for what was going to happen—was it? But Oswald? Then she felt disposed to laugh. Could Oswald have anything so serious, anything so solemn in his thoughts? To be sure he had spoken mysteriously of a revelation, a revolution. Cara did not know what to think. She was so young that the idea of anyone being 'in love' with her gave a strange thrill of half-alarmed, half-wondering excitement to her being—was it possible that someone thought of a little girl like herself, as of Una, or Rosalind? A little laugh, frightened and faltering, broke from her unawares—and then she blushed crimson and was horrified with herself. Laugh! on such a subject! Her heart began to beat; her head turned round. What could she say to him, what must she do, if it was this that was in Oswald's thoughts?

CHAPTER XXII.

MYSTIFIED.

'My dear boy,' said Mrs. Meredith, 'I see what you are thinking of. You are young to settle in life, and about means there might be some difficulty; but to see you happy I would make any sacrifice. Nothing is so important as to make a good choice, which you have done, thank God. That goes beyond every prudential consideration. Nothing else matters in comparison.' And, as she said this, tears stood in her soft eyes. It was a long speech for Mrs. Meredith. Oswald had come back to the drawing-room in a loose jacket, with some lingering odour of his cigar about him, to bid his mother good-night. She was standing by the mantelpiece with her candle in her hand, while he stood close by, looking down into the fire, caressing the down, scarcely developed into a moustache, on his upper lip, and thus hiding a conscious smile.

'So you think my choice a good one, mother?' he said, with a laugh.

Mrs. Meredith did not think him serious enough for such a serious moment; but then how useless it is to go on contending with people because they will not feel as you think proper in every emergency! After all, everyone must act according to his nature; the easy man cannot be made restless, nor the light-hearted solemn. This was Mrs. Meredith's philosophy. But she gave a little sigh, as she had often done, to the frivolity of her elder son. It was late, and the fire was very low upon the hearth—one of the lamps had burned out—the room was dimmer than usual; in a corner Edward sat reading or pretending to read, rather glum, silent, and sad. Oswald, who had come in, in a very pleasant disposition, as indeed he generally was, smoothed his young moustache with great complacency. He saw at once that it was Cara of whom his mother was thinking, and it was not at all disagreeable to him that she should think so. He was quite willing to be taken for Cara's lover. There was no harm in a little mystification, and the thought on the whole pleased him.

'Ah, Oswald, I wish you were a little more serious,

especially at such a moment,' said his mother; 'there are so many things to think of. I wish you would try to realise that it is a very, very important moment in your life.'

'It is a very pleasant one, at least,' he said, smiling at her—with a smile which from the time of his baby naughtiness had always subdued his mother—and he lighted her candle, and stooped with filial grace to kiss her cheek. 'Good-night, mother, and don't trouble about me. I am very happy,' he said, with a half-laugh at his own cleverness in carrying on this delusion. Oswald thought a great deal of his own cleverness. It was a pleasant subject to him. He stood for some time after his mother was gone, looking down into the waning fire, and smiling to himself. He enjoyed the idea reflected from their minds that he was an accepted lover, a happy man betrothed and enjoying the first sweetness of love. He had not said so; he had done nothing, so far as he was aware, to originate such a notion; but it rather amused and flattered him now that they had of themselves quite gratuitously started it. As for Cara herself being displeased or annoyed by it, that did not occur to him. She was only just a girl, not a person of dignity, and there could be no injury to her in such a report. Besides, it was not his doing; he was noway to blame. Poor dear little Cara! if it did come to that, a man was not much to be pitied who had Cara to fall back upon at the last.

Thus he stood musing, with that conscious smile on his face, now and then casting a glance at himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He was not thinking of his brother, who sat behind with the same book in his hands that he had been pretending to read all the evening. Edward rose when his mother was gone, and came up to the fire. He was no master of words befitting the occasion; he wanted to say something, and he did not know what to say. His elder brother, the most popular of the two—he who was always a little in advance of Edward in everything, admired and beloved and thought of as Edward had never been—how was the younger, less brilliant, less considered brother to say anything to him that bore the character of advice? And yet Edward's heart ached to do so; to tell the truth, his heart ached for more than this. It had seemed to him that Cara confided in himself, believed in his affectionate sympathy more than she did in Oswald's; and to see Oswald in the

triumphant position of avowed lover, as they all thought him to be, was gall and bitterness to the poor young fellow, in whose heart for all these years a warm recollection of Cara had been smouldering. He was the poor man whose ewe-lamb his rich brother had taken, and the pang of surprised distress in his soul was all the bitterer for that consciousness which never quite left his mind, that Oswald was always the one preferred. But Edward, though he felt this, was not of an envious nature, and was rather sad for himself than resentful of his brother's happiness. He went up to him, dragged by his tender heart much against the resistance of his will, feeling that he too must say something. He laid his hand, which quivered a little with suppressed agitation, on Oswald's shoulder.

'I don't know what to say to you, old fellow,' he said, with an attempt at an easy tone. 'I needn't wish you happiness, for you've got it——'

In spite of himself Oswald laughed. He had a school-boy's delight in mystification, and somehow a sense of Edward's disappointment came in, and gave him a still greater perception of the joke. Not that he wished to hurt Edward, but to most men who know nothing of love there is so much of the ridiculous involved, even in a disappointment, that the one who is heart-whole may be deliberately cruel without any evil intention. 'Oh, yes, I am happy enough,' he said, looking round at his brother, who, for his part, could not meet his eyes.

'I hope you won't mind what I am going to say to you,' said Edward. 'I am not so light-hearted a fellow as you are, and that makes me, perhaps, notice others. Oswald, look here—*she* is not so light-hearted as you are, either. She wants taking care of. She is very sensitive, and feels many things that perhaps you would not feel. Don't be vexed. I thought I would just say this once for all—and there is no good thing I don't wish you,' cried Edward, concluding abruptly, to cover the little break in his voice.

'You needn't look so glum about it, Ned,' said his brother. 'I don't mean to be turned off to-morrow. We shall have time to mingle our tears on various occasions before then. Mamma and you have a way of jumping at conclusions. As for *her*——'

'I don't like slang on such a subject,' said Edward, hotly.

'Never mind ; there are some things we should never agree upon if we talked till doomsday. Good-night.'

'Good-night, old man, and I wish you a better temper—unless you'll come and have another cigar first,' said Oswald, with cheerful assurance. 'My mind is too full for sleep.'

'Your mind is full of——'

'Her, of course,' said Oswald, with a laugh ; and he went downstairs whistling the air of Fortunio's song—

Je sais mourir pour ma mie,
Sans la nommer.

He was delighted with the mistake which mystified everybody, and awakened envies, and regrets, and congratulations, which were all in their different ways tributes to his importance. And no doubt the mistake might be turned into reality at any moment should he decide that this would be desirable. He had only to ask Cara, he felt, and she would be as pleased as the others ; and, indeed, under the influence of a suggestion which made him feel his own importance so delightfully, Oswald was not at all sure that this was not the best thing, and the evident conclusion of the whole. But in the meantime he let his mind float away upon other fancies. *Her!* how little they knew who She was whom they thus ignorantly discussed. When he had got into the sanctuary of smoke, at which Mrs. Meredith shook her head, but which she had carefully prepared for her boys all the same, Oswald lit the other cigar which he had invited his brother to accompany, and sat down with that smile still upon his face, to enjoy it and his fancies. He laid his hand indolently upon a book, but his own musings were at the moment more amusing, more pleasantly exciting than any novel. The situation pleased and stimulated his fancy in every way. The demure little school procession, the meek young conventual beauty, so subdued and soft, yet with sparkles responsive to be struck out of her, half-frightened, yet at the same time elevated above all the temptations that might have assailed other girls—it was scarcely possible to realise anything more captivating to the imagination. He sat and dreamed over it all till the small hours after midnight sounded one by one, and his fire went out, and he began to feel chilly ; upon which argument Oswald, still smiling to himself, went to bed, well pleased with his fancies as with everything else belonging to him ;

and all the better pleased that he felt conscious of having roused a considerable deal of excitement and emotion, and of having, without any decided intention on his own part, delightfully taken in everybody, which delighted the school-boy part of his nature. To be so clever as he was conscious of being, and a poet, and a great many other fine things, it was astonishing how much of the schoolboy was still in him. But yet he had no compunction as he went up the long staircase: he had not finished, nor indeed made the least advance with his poem.

From old Pietro's canvas freshly sprung
Fair face!——

This beginning was what he liked best.

Edward was moved in a very different way. He would have been magnanimous and given up Cara—that is, having no real right to Cara, he might have given up the youthful imagination of her which had always been his favourite fancy, to his brother, with some wringing of the heart, but with that compensation which youth has in the sublime sense of self-sacrifice. But there is no bitterness greater in this world, either for young or old, than that of giving up painfully to another something which that other holds with levity and treats with indifference. To hear Cara, the sacred young princess of his own fancy, spoken of lightly, and the supreme moment of possible union with her characterised as ‘turning off,’ was a downfall which made Edward half-frantic with pain and shame, and indignation and impatience. She would be to Oswald only a commonplace little wife, to be petted when he was in the humour, standing very much lower than himself in his own good graces; whereas, to Edward she would have been——! but it was Oswald, not Edward, whom she had chosen. How strange they are! all those wonderful confusions of humanity which depress the wisest, the blind jumps at fate, the foolish choices, the passing over of the best to take the worst, which form the ordinary course of existence everywhere, the poor young fellow thought, in this first encounter with adverse events; and this was mingled with that strange wonder of the tender heart to find itself uncomprehended and rejected, while gifts much less precious than those it offers are accepted, which is one of the most poignant pangs of nature:—and these feelings surging dimly through Edward's mind,

filled him with a despondency and pain beyond words. Indeed, he could not have told all the bitterness of the vague heavy blackness which swallowed up the fair world and everything lovely before him. It was not only that Cara had (he thought) chosen Oswald instead of himself, but also that the lesser love was preferred to the greater, and that the thing one man would have worshipped was thrown to the careless keeping of another, as if it were a thing of no price. The personal question and the abstract one twisted and twined into one, as is general in the first trials of youth. He himself unconsciously became to himself the symbol of true love misjudged, of gold thrown away for pinchbeck—and Cara the symbol of that terrible perennial mistake which is always going on from chapter to chapter of the world's history. Even, for he was generous in the very pangs of that visionary envy, it added another pang of suffering to Edward's mind, that he could not but consider his brother as the pinchbeck, so far as Cara at least was considered. While Oswald sat smiling to himself through the fumes of his cigar, Edward threw his window open and gazed out into the chill darkness of the winter night, feeling the cold wind, which made him shiver, to be more in consonance with his feelings than the warmth of the comfortable room inside.

Thus the whole little world was turned upside down by Oswald's light-hearted preference of his own gratification to anything other people might think. He had half-forgotten the appointment he had so anxiously made with Cara when the morning came, having got into full swing with his verses—which was still a more captivating way of expressing his sentiments than confession of them to Cara—

Fair face from old Pietro's canvas sprung,
Soft as the eve, fresh as the day,
Sweet shadow of angelic faces, young
And heavenly bright as they,
Soul of all lovely things, by poets sung—

He could not content himself with the last line—'Accept my lay,' or 'my humble lay,' was the easiest termination, but it was prosaic and affected. The consideration of this occupied him to the entire exclusion of Cara, and he only recollected with what anxiety he had begged her to get rid of her aunt and see him alone at a quarter past twelve, having appointed to meet her at noon. He thrust the bit of paper on which he

had been scribbling into his pocket, when he remembered, and went off languidly to pay his visit; he had meant to have completed the poem, and read it over to her, but it was clear that this must be postponed to another day.

Meanwhile good Miss Cherry, full of anxieties, had got up much earlier than was necessary, and had spent a long day before twelve o'clock. By way of giving to her withdrawal at that fated hour an air of perfect naturalness and spontaneity, she invented a great many little household occupations, going here and there over the different rooms with Nurse, looking over Cara's things to see what was wanted, and making a great many notes of household necessities. The one most serious occupation which she had in her mind she postponed until the moment when the lover, or supposed lover, should appear. This was her real object in coming to London, the interview which she had determined to have with her brother. With a heart beating more loudly than it had beaten for years, she waited till Oswald Meredith's appearance gave the signal for this assault, which it was her duty to make, but which she attempted with so much trembling. By the time Oswald did appear her breath had almost forsaken her with agitation and excitement, and she had become almost too much absorbed in her own enterprise to wonder that at such a moment the young man should be late. She was already in the library when Oswald went upstairs. Two interviews so solemn going on together! the comfort of both father and daughter hanging in the balance. Miss Cherry knocked so softly as to be unheard, and had to repeat the summons before that 'Come in' sounded through the closed door, which was to her as the trump of doom.

She went in. Mr. Beresford was seated as usual at his writing-table, with all his books about him. He was busy, according to his gentle idea of being busy, and looked up with some surprise at his sister when she entered. Miss Cherry came noiselessly forward in her grey gown, with her soft steps. He held his pen suspended in his fingers, thinking perhaps it was some passing question which she meant to ask, then laid it down with the slightest shadow of impatience, covered immediately by a pretended readiness to know what she wanted, and a slight sigh over his wasted time. Those who have their bread to work for take interruptions far more easily than those whose labours are of importance to nobody, and

Macaulay writing his History would not have breathed half so deep a sigh as did James Beresford over the half-hour he was about to lose.

'You want something?' he said, with the smile of a conscious martyr.

'Only to speak to you, James,' said Miss Cherry, breathless. Then she looked up at him with a deprecating, wistful smile. 'It is not very often that we meet now, or have any opportunity for a little talk,' she said.

'Yes, Cherry, that is true enough. I have been so much away.'

'And people drift apart; that is true too. I know I can't follow you in all your deep studies, James; but my heart is always the same. I think of you more than of anyone, and of Cara. I hope she will live to be the dearest comfort to you as she always was to us. The light went away from the Hill, I think, when she went away.'

'You have been very good to her, I am sure,' he said, with due gratefulness, 'and most kind. You have brought her up very wisely, Cherry. I have no fault to find with her. She is a good little girl.'

Miss Cherry, to hear her small goddess thus described, felt a sudden shock and thrill of horror; but she subdued herself. 'I wanted to speak to you, James,' she said, 'of that:' then, with a slight pant and heave of her frightened bosom—'oh, James! do you not think you could give her a little more of your society—learn to know her better? You would find it worth your while!'

'Know her better! My dear Cherry, I know her very well, poor child. She is a good little girl, always obedient and dutiful. There cannot be very much fellowship between a man of my occupations and a quiet simple girl such as Cara is, I am glad to say; but I am very fond of her. You must not think I don't appreciate my child.'

'It is not quite that,' said poor Cherry. 'Oh, James, if you only knew it, our Cara is a great deal more than merely a good little girl. I would not for a moment think of finding fault with you; but if you would see her a little more in the evening—if you would not go out quite so much——'

'Go out!—I really go out very seldom. I think you are making a mistake, Cherry, my dear.'

'Oh, no, James; since I have come it has been my great

thought. I know you don't mean to be unkind; but when you are out every evening——'

'Really, Cherry, I had no idea that my liberty was to be infringed, and my habits criticised.'

Miss Cherry came up to him with an anxious face and wet eyes. 'Oh, James, don't be angry! That is not what I mean. It is not to criticise you. But if you would stay with your child in the evening sometimes. She is so sweet and young. It would give you pleasure if you were to try—and—it would be better, far better in other ways too.'

'I don't understand what you mean,' he said, hurriedly.

'No, no. I was sure, quite sure, you never thought, nor meant anything. But the world is a strange world. It is always misconceiving innocent people—and, James, I am certain, nay, I *know*, it would be so much better: for every one—in every way.'

'You seem to have made up your mind to be mysterious, Cherry,' he said. 'I don't see to whom it can be of importance how I pass my time. To Cara you think? I don't suppose she cares so much for my society. You are an old-fashioned woman, my poor Cherry, and think as you were brought up to think. But, my dear, it is not necessary to salvation that a man should be always in his own house, and between a man of fifty and a girl of seventeen there is not really so much in common.'

'When they are father and daughter, James——'

'That does not make very much difference that I can see. But if you think Cara is dull, we must hit upon something better than my society. Young friends, perhaps—if there is any other girl she likes particularly, let her invite her friend by all means. I don't want my little girl to be dull.'

'It is not that, James. She never complains; but, oh, if you would try to make friends with the child! She would interest you, she would be a pleasant companion. She would make you like your home again: and, oh! pardon me, James, would not that be better than finding your happiness elsewhere?'

At this moment the door was opened, and John appeared ushering in a scientific visitor, whose very name was enough to frighten any humble person like Miss Cherry. She withdrew precipitately, not sorry to be saved from further discussion, and wondering at herself how she could have had

the audacity to speak so to James. Nothing but her anxiety could have given her such boldness. It was presumption, she felt, even in her secret soul, to criticise, as he said, a man like her brother, older and so much wiser than herself; but sometimes a little point of custom or regard to appearances might be overlooked by a clever man in the very greatness of his thoughts. This was how kind Miss Cherry put it—and in that way the mouse might help the lion, and the elderly, old-fashioned sister be of use to a wise and learned man, though he was a member of all the societies. And how kindly he had listened to her, and received her bold animadversions! When there is anything to admire in the behaviour of those they look up to, kind women, like Miss Cherry, can always find some humble plea like this at least, for a little adoration. Such a clever man, had he not a right to be furious, brutal if he pleased, when a simple little woman dared to find fault with him? But, on the contrary, how well he took it—what a man he was!

Miss Cherry, hurrying upstairs, met Cara coming down, and her other excitement came back to her in a moment. She took the girl's hands in hers, though it was in no more retired place than the landing on the stairs. 'Well, my darling,' she said, anxiously.

'Well, Aunt Cherry!' said Cara, and laughed. 'I was coming to look for you, to ask you to come out and get some ribbon——'

'But Cara——'

'Come!' cried the girl, running upstairs again to get her hat; and what had really happened that morning Miss Cherry never knew. So that both her excitements came to nothing, and the day turned out uneventful like other common days.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A REMONSTRANCE.

MR. BERESFORD was seated in his library, as usual, in the morning; he had breakfasted and glanced over his newspaper, and now had settled down to 'work,' that is, to what he called work. He would not have been much the worse had he idled, nor would his finances or anybody's comfort have suffered;

probably that was one reason why he was so industrious. His writing-table was arranged with the most perfect order: here his blotting-book, his pens, his paper of all sizes, from ponderous foolscap to the lightest accidental note; there his books of reference; in the centre, the volume he was studying. John, by long practice, had learned to know exactly where to place all his master's paraphernalia. He sat in front of the fire, which crackled merrily and made light *pétilllements*, in the sound of which alone there was genial company. The ruddy sunshine of the winter morning entered in a sidelong gleam; everything was comfortable, warm, and luxurious round him; the room was lined almost as high as the ceiling with books, and the square table near the further window was covered with magazines and newspapers. He spared nothing in that way, though for himself he did not read half the literature that was placed there ready for him. He took his place at his table, opened his book, put down the letters which he had brought with him from the breakfast-table, and prepared to write—or rather to work—for his object was to write a review of the serious book he was reading; his letters were about this and other important matters—a meeting of the Imperial Society—the arrangements to be made for a series of lectures—the choice of a new member. He put down all these momentous epistles on his table, and turned over a page of the book in respect to which he was prepared to give to the world some new ideas of his own on the relations between mind and matter, or rather, upon some of those strange processes by which the human brain, which is as purely matter as the human leg, pranks itself up in the appearance of a spiritual entity. He was fond of philosophical questions. But when he had made all these preparations he stopped suddenly short and began to think. What process was it that brought across him, like a sudden breath of summer air with the scent of flowers in it, that sudden flood of recollections? In a moment, invading his breast and his mind with thoughts of the past, he felt as people do to whom an old friend appears suddenly, bringing with him a hundred forgotten associations. Had someone come into the warm and pleasant room and laid a hand upon his shoulder and looked him in the face? If James Beresford had been a superstitious man he would have thought so. His wife had been dead for more than five years—and long and weary and painful these years

had been. Lately, however, his heart had been lulled to rest by sweet friendliness and sympathy and help; he had felt strong enough to take up his ordinary life again and return into the world—not unfaithful, but consoled and soothed. Nothing had happened to him to break this sensation of rest from trouble, and what happened now was not painful. It was only the sudden return of thoughts which had been in abeyance. She seemed to come and stand by him, as she used to do, looking over his shoulder, asking after his work. ‘What are you doing?’ he seemed to hear her say—leaning over him with that familiar proprietorship of him and all his works and ways which was so sweet. Why had this visitation come to him to-day? Of course it must have been some impression on his nerves which thus reflected itself through his being. Some chance contact had stirred one of those strings which move what we call feelings in the strange machinery of our puppet nature. He thought somehow that when he had said this it explained the mystery. All at once, like a gale of spring, like a sudden thaw—or like someone coming into the room; though the last metaphor was not so fine as the others, it was the most true. Few of our mental processes (he would have allowed) are pure thought—this was not thought at all; he felt as if she stood by him—she whom he had lost: as if their life came back as it used to be. His grief for her, he knew, had been lulled to rest, and it was not any revival of the sharpness and bitterness of that grief which moved him: it was a return for a few minutes of the life they had lived together, of the conditions which life had borne before.

Perhaps it was simply because his sister was there, and the sound of the two feminine voices, hers and Cara’s, at the breakfast-table, had brought back memories of the old times. He leant his elbows on his open book and his chin in the hollow of his hands. What a different life it had been! What were his societies now, his articles, all his ‘work,’ to the first spontaneous living of those days that were dead? How she would come in familiar, sure of her right to be wherever he was—not timid, like Cara, who never knew whether her father would be pleased or not pleased to see her, nor reverential, like good Cherry, who admired and wondered at his books and his writing. He knew how these two would look at any moment if need or business brought them knocking to his

door. But he never could tell how *she* would look, so various were her aspects, never the same—two women sometimes in one moment, turning to tears or to sunshine in the twinkling of an eye, cheering him, provoking him, stimulating him. Ah, what a change! life might have its soothings now, its consolations, little makings up and props, to give it the appearance of being the same life as before, but nothing could ever make it what it had been. He had not died of it, neither would he die of it—the grief that kills is rare; but whatever might happen to him in the world, so much was certain, that the delight of life was over, the glory gone out of it. And he did not wish it to be otherwise, he said to himself. There are things which a man can have but once. Some men are so happy as to retain those best things of life till old age—but he was not one of those blessed men——. And he was no longer wretched and a wanderer on the face of the earth. Time had brought him a softening quiet, a dim pleasantness of tranquillity and friends—good, tender, soothing, kindest friends.

Someone coming in brokes suddenly this strange revival of memory—and of all people in the world it was the doctor, Maxwell, whose name was so linked to the recollections of the old life, but who, Beresford felt, had never been the same to him since Annie died. His mind had been so preoccupied that he had never inquired what was the cause of this estrangement. What did it matter to him if all the world was estranged? He had felt vaguely; and if he thought upon the subject at all, supposed that in the anguish of his mind he had said something or done something to vex his old friend. But what did it matter? His life had been too much shipwrecked at first to leave his mind at liberty to care what might happen. And now the estrangement was a *fait accompli*. But his heart was touched and soft that morning. The thought of Annie had come back to him, and here was someone deeply associated with Annie. In the little start with which he got up from his chair at the sound of Maxwell's name, a rush of resolution ran through his veins with a rapidity such as leaves words hopelessly behind. 'I will get to the bottom of it whatever it is. I will know the cause, and make it up with Maxwell.' These words would have taken some definite atom of time to think and say, but the thought rushed through his mind instantaneously as he rose holding out his hand.

'Maxwell! you are an unusual visitor now-a-days. I am very glad to see you,' he said. That he should have come just now of all times in the world!

'Yes; I have ceased to be about the house as I used to be,' the doctor said, with a slight confusion, grasping the hand offered to him. And then they sat down on two chairs opposite to each other, and there was a pause. They were both embarrassed a little. This kind of coolness between two friends is more difficult to get over than an actual quarrel. Maxwell was not at his ease. How many recollections this room brought back to him! That strange visitor who had stood by James Beresford's side a minute before stood by his now. He seemed to see her standing against the light, shaking her finger at them in reproof. How often she had done so, the light catching her dress, making a kind of halo round her! Was it possible she was gone—gone, disappeared from before their eyes, making no sign? And yet how clearly she seemed to stand there, looking at the two whose talk she had so often interrupted, broken off, made an end of, with capricious sweet impertinences. Maxwell, like her husband, felt the reality of her so strong that his mind rejected with a strange vertigo the idea of her absolute severance from this house and this life. The vertigo grew still greater, and his head seemed to turn round and round when he remembered why he had come.

'Why is it?' said Beresford. 'Something seems to have come between us—I can't tell what. Is it accidental, or does it mean anything? I have had a distracted life, as you know, and I may have done something amiss——'

'No, no,' said the other, hurriedly; 'let us say nothing about that. I meant nothing. Beresford, if you have this feeling now, what will you think when you hear that I have undertaken a disagreeable, intrusive mission?'

'Intrusive?' He smiled. 'I don't see what you could be intrusive about. You used to know all my affairs—and if you don't know them now, it is not my fault.'

'Good heavens!' cried the doctor, involuntarily, 'how am I to do it? Look here, Beresford; I said I would come, thinking that I, who knew you so well, would annoy you less than a stranger—but I don't feel so sure about that now.'

'What is this gunpowder plot?' said Beresford, with a

laugh. 'Have I been guilty of high treason without knowing it, and must I fly for my life?'

The doctor cleared his throat; he grew red in the face; finally he jumped up from his chair and went to the big fireplace, where he stood with his back to the fire, and his face a little out of his friend's sight.

'Beresford, have you ever thought what a strange position Mrs. Meredith is in?'

'Mrs. Meredith!' He said this with such unfeigned surprise that his visitor felt more awkward than ever. 'What can she have to do with any disunion between you and me?'

'By Jove!' cried the doctor, 'we are all a pack of fools;' and from the fire he walked to the window in the perturbation of his thoughts.

Beresford laughed. 'One can never say anything civil to a speech like that—especially as, forgive me! I have not a notion what you are being fools about.'

Maxwell looked out into the square to pluck up courage. He coughed as men do when they are utterly at a loss—when it is worth while to gain even a moment. 'Don't be angry with me,' he said, with sudden humility. 'I should not have taken it in hand, especially as you have that feeling—but—look here, I *have* taken it in hand, and I must speak. Beresford, old Sommerville came to me yesterday. He's Meredith's friend, with a general commission to look after the family.'

'Has anything happened to Meredith?' said Mr. Beresford, with concern. 'This is the second time you have mentioned them. I scarcely know him—but if there is anything wrong, I shall be very sorry for *her* sake.'

'There is nothing wrong, unless it is of your doing,' said the doctor, with abrupt determination. 'To tell the truth, Meredith has heard, or somebody has told him, or a gossiping has been got up—I don't know what—about your visits. You go there too often, they say—every night—'

'Maxwell!' cried James Beresford, springing to his feet.

'There! I told you,' said the doctor. 'I said you would be angry—as if it were my fault. I am only the mouthpiece. Old Sommerville would have come to you himself—but I was sure it could be nothing but inadvertence, and undertook the office, knowing you too well—much too well—to think for a moment—'

‘Inadvertence! Knowing me too well to think! In the name of heaven, what is there to think? What have I been inadvertent about? Angry! Of course I am angry. What have I done to be gossiped about? One of us must be out of his senses surely, either you or I——’

‘No, it isn’t that. Gossip does not spare anyone. And, pardon me,’ said the doctor, growing bolder now that the worst was over, ‘if you had ever thought on the subject, you must have seen that such frequent visits—to a woman who is married, whose husband is at the other end of the world——’

‘Stop—stop, I tell you! I will not have *her* discussed or her name introduced.’

‘That is quite right, Beresford. I knew you would feel so. Is it right then that the tenderest heart on the face of the earth should be worried and bullied because of you?’

‘Good God!’ cried the bewildered man, ‘has she been worried and bullied? What do you mean? Who has presumed to find fault? She is—— I am not going to say what she is.’

‘It is not necessary. I know that as well as anyone.’

Beresford made a half-conscious pause, and looked at his reprover with a sudden involuntary raising of his eyebrows. Knew that as well as anyone! Did he? Vain boaster! Who but himself knew all the consoling sweetness, all the soft wealth of sympathy in this friend of friends? He felt more angry with Maxwell for this false pretension than for all his other sins. ‘I am at a loss to know,’ he said, coldly, ‘by what right anyone attempts to interfere with my liberty of action. I am not a man whose visits to any house can be considered suspicious. I should have thought that my character and my antecedents were enough to preserve me from injurious comment and the gossip you speak of.’

‘Beresford,’ said the other, hastily, ‘who thinks of you? No amount of gossip could do you any real harm. You must see that. The question is about *her*.’

It was Beresford’s turn now to be excited. He began to pace about the room in deep annoyance and agitation. Of course this was true. What was nothing to a man might be everything to a woman; and no man worthy the name would expose a woman to comment. He took refuge, first, in furious abuse of gossip. What had anyone to do with his proceedings? A man is always more shocked and angry to find

himself the object of remark than a woman is. It seemed incredible to him that *he*, of all people in the world, *he* should be the object of impertinent remark. The idea was intolerable to Beresford. The doctor wisely said nothing, but let him have his ravings out, withdrawing himself to a chair by the table, where he sat writing out imaginary prescriptions with the worn stump of a pen which he found there, and keeping as far out of the passionate stream of monologue as possible. This was wise treatment, the best he could have adopted, and after a while the subject of the operation calmed down. He flung himself at last into his chair, and there was a stormy pause.

‘I suppose,’ said Beresford, with a long-drawn breath of mingled pain and anger, ‘this was what Cherry meant. I could not make her out. She is in it too. Have you all laid your heads together and consulted what was the thing that would pain me most—the most susceptible point left?’

Maxwell made no direct reply. ‘If Miss Cherry has spoken to you, Beresford, you know your sister,’ he said. ‘She would not hurt a fly—much less you, whom she holds in such high respect; and she would not think evil readily—would she, now? If she has spoken, you must understand that there is something in it. Listen, my dear fellow. There are things that must be done and left undone in this world for the sake of the fools in it merely. You know that as well as I do. Say the fools ought to be defied and crushed if you like, but in reality we have all to consider them. The people of bad imaginations and low minds and mean views really make the laws for the rest of the world. We can’t help it. For ourselves it might not matter; but for those who are dear to us—for those who are less independent than we——’

Again there was a pause. Beresford sat with his elbows on the table and bit his nails savagely. In this painful amusement there seemed a certain relief. He stared straight before him, seeing nothing. At last he turned round sharply upon the doctor, who, with his head bent down, still sat scribbling without any ink with the old stump of the pen in his hand. ‘What do you want me to do?’ he said.

‘Beresford, I did not come here to dictate to you. I came simply to call your attention——’

‘Oh, let us not quibble about words! Dictation! yes, and something more than dictation. Of course I am helpless

before the plea you bring up. Of course I have nothing to do but submit, if there is any question of annoyance to— Low minds and bad imaginations, indeed ! That anyone should suggest the most distant possibility, the shadow of a reproach !'

'We suggest nothing of the sort, Beresford. We suggest only a most simple precaution—a rule ordinarily observed.'

He made a gesture of impatience, stopping further explanation, and again for two minutes, which looked like an hour, the two men sat silent together, not, it may be supposed, with any increase of friendliness towards each other in their thoughts. Perhaps, however, it was only on the side of the reprovéd that this feeling was really strong. The reprover was compunctious and eager to do anything he could to conciliate. He kept a furtive watch upon his victim as he scribbled. Beresford had retreated within that most invulnerable of all fortresses—silence, and sat, still biting his nails, staring into the vacant air, neither by word nor look making any communication of his thoughts. Nothing is more difficult than to maintain a silence like this; the least absorbed of the two engaged in the passage of arms comes to feel after a time that he must speak or die—and what to say? More upon the same subject might lessen the impression already made, and to introduce another subject would be impossible. When the pause had lasted as long as possibility permitted, Maxwell got up, put the pen slowly back in the tray from which it had strayed, tossed the piece of paper he had been scribbling upon into the waste-basket, gathered up his gloves, his stick, his hat. Nothing could be more slow and hesitating than all these preparations for departure, which were somewhat ostentatious at the same time, by way of calling the attention of Beresford, and perhaps drawing forth something more. 'I must be going,' he said at last, holding out his hand. 'I hope you won't think me—unfriendly, Beresford, in anything. I have said.'

'Good morning,' said the other, sullenly ; then he made a visible effort to command himself and rose up, but slowly, putting out his hand. 'Very likely not,' he said. 'I don't say it was unfriendly. You would not have taken such a disagreeable office on yourself if you had meant unkindness. No ; I suppose I should thank you, but it is rather hard to do it. Good-by.'

There was no more said. Maxwell went away, not feeling

very victorious or proud of himself. Was not he a fool to have undertaken it in order to prevent scandal, he said to himself, in order to save a woman from annoyance, in order to help James Beresford out of trouble—a man whom he had liked, and from whom he had been estranged? What business had he to meddle with other people's business? This, I fear, was his reflection, as it has been the reflection of so many who have strained a point to aid a friend, and whose self-denial has not been appreciated. 'Catch me doing such a foolish thing again,' he said to himself.

As for Beresford, he resumed his seat and his thoughts when the other was gone. Those thoughts were hot within him, and full of pain. He who, even when this messenger of evil arrived, had been thinking with faithful love of his wife; he whose life had been made a desert by her dying, whose whole existence was changed, who had not cared for years what became of him, because of that loss—to be met by this unjust and insane reproof as soon as he had screwed his courage to the sticking-place, and resumed his natural position in his own house. It had been a hard thing to do; at every corner he had expected to meet her—in the silence he had fancied he heard her calling him—the whole house was full of her, echoing with her steps and her voice. Yet he had schooled himself to come back, to resume so much as remained to him of life under his own roof—so much as remained, not thinking of years, but of value and merit. He was not of very much use to anyone, nor had he been much missed, perhaps, except in the working of the societies, and there were so many people who could do that. But he had been patient and come back, and established himself 'at home,' because it was his duty. He had not shrunk from his duty. And this was his reward. His one source of soft consolation—the one gentle friend on whose constant sympathy he could reckon—who made this life of endurance supportable to him, and kept him up by kind words, by understanding his wants and troubles—she was to be taken from him. He got up, and walked up and down his room, and then went to the window and looked blankly out. Almost without knowing what it was, he saw a brougham come to the next door, and old Mr. Sommerville step out of it, and enter Mrs. Meredith's house. He had gone to warn her, to disturb the sweet composure of her mind, to embitter all her thoughts. Beresford

turned round, and began to walk up and down more and more hotly. Could anything in the world be more innocent? He asked, nay, he wanted, nothing more of her. To go and sit by her now and then (this was how he characterized his long and daily visits), what was there in that to justify this insulting demand upon him? He lashed himself up into a fury when he thought of it. He, the truest of mourners, and she, the least frivolous of women. If ever there was a true friendship, full of support and mutual comfort, this was the one. And now, at the pleasure of a set of wretched gossips, ill-minded men, disagreeable women, was this gentle makeshift and substitute for domestic happiness to be torn from him? And how—good heavens, how?

That was the question. It was easy to talk, and say that such a thing must cease; but how was it to be done? Was he supposed capable of telling her that he must resign her friendship? Was Sommerville, perhaps, making the communication at this very moment—telling her that it must not be; suggesting thoughts that would distress her mind, and disturb the whole tenor of her life? For to give pain would be worse than misfortune to her, and she could not so cast him off without giving pain and feeling it. He thought—it was an imagination—that he heard voices high in discussion on the other side of the wall that separated the two houses. Was that old meddler taking it upon him to lecture *her* now?

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL.

OLD Mr. Sommerville got out of his little brougham at Mrs. Meredith's door. He was a wealthy old man, of whom nobody knew very much, except that he had made his money in India, and that he lived in cosy bachelor chambers, with everything extremely comfortable about him, and knew everybody, and was fond of good things, the pleasures of the table, as old-fashioned people said, and indeed all other pleasures within the reach of a respectable old person of sixty-five. He kept a neat little brougham, and occasionally mounted a strong, steady cob, with a coat like satin, looking much better fed than his master did, who was always a meagre

old gentleman, notwithstanding his good living. Mr. Sommerville was the confidential friend of the absent Mr. Meredith, whom nobody, not even his own children, knew. As he had advanced in prosperity, it was through old Sommerville's hands that his family were allowed to share the advantage of his increasing income, and the boys had learned to know that it was he who reported concerning them to their father, and received communications from their tutors. The unknown Mr. Meredith did nothing to discredit his wife; but he kept this constant check over her. It had often been galling enough to her; but she was a sweet-tempered woman, used to accepting the evil with the good, and she had wisely put up with the curb. She disarmed Mr. Sommerville by her gentleness and sweetness, by throwing her house open to him, and inviting the scrutiny which she might have defied, had she been of a different disposition. Sommerville had not been unworthy of the confidence placed in him. He had kept up a certain appearance of investigation. All their lives long the boys had been accustomed to connect his appearance with a lecture of more than usual seriousness from their mother; but she had the good sense never to say anything to connect the old man's name with the reprimand or warning. All that she said was, 'Your father will not like to hear that you are idle, disobedient, unruly,' as the case might be; therefore, it was not from her they learned that Sommerville meant special scrutiny and fault-finding. But since they had been grown up, Oswald and Edward had themselves supplied the thread of connection. Even this, however, had not made them dislike their old friend. At one moment of especial wickedness Oswald, indeed, had designated their father's deputy as the Spy; but this was simply a spark of malicious boyhood, struck out in a moment of resentment, and did not permanently affect their minds, though the title lasted. The Spy was, on the whole, friendly and indulgent—sometimes even he got them out of small scrapes, and it was he who persuaded the mother that furtive cigars and other precocious masculinities were not criminal. So that altogether, notwithstanding his ominous name, he was not unpopular in the house. It was but lately that he had taken to coming to those almost daily receptions, which was so principal a feature in Mrs. Meredith's existence. There he would sit and watch her proceedings, her sympathetic talks, the audiences she gave, and all the little acts of adoration

performed before her, with not unkindly eyes. She was a kind of gentle impostor, a natural humbug, to old Sommersville; but he laughed softly to himself as he thus characterised her, and did not like her less. Never, during all these years, amid all this popularity, had she given him occasion for a word of serious warning. Amid all the admiration and semi-worship she had received, the kind but watchful Spy had found no harm in her; but now, at last, here was something which called for his interference. To see him arrive at that hour in the morning was alarming in itself to Mrs. Meredith. She met him with her usual kind smile, but with an earnest look of inquiry.

‘Is anything the matter?’ she said.

‘Send the boy away,’ said Mr. Sommerville, in an undertone.

It was Edward who was in the room, and his mother found a commission for him with tremulous haste; for the distant Meredith was not always reasonable in his requirements, and of late had written impatiently about the coming out of one of his sons—a calamity which their mother with all her might was endeavouring to stave off and postpone. She thought her husband’s friend must bring still more urgent orders, and her heart began to beat.

‘I wish you would go and tell Cara that I hope she will come to the Symptons with me this afternoon, Edward,’ she said.

And Edward, full of the thought of his brother’s happiness, and loth yet eager to see if Cara was happy in this new development of affairs, obeyed reluctantly, but still with a secret alacrity. She was left alone with the mentor, who had so often brought her advice or semi-reproof.

‘You have something to tell me? Oh, Mr. Sommerville, what is it?’ she cried.

‘It is nothing very bad. You must not be alarmed—there is no ill news,’ he said.

The anxious mother looked at him with a wistful entreaty in her eyes. Ill news was not what she feared. When a woman has had neither companionship nor help from her husband for a dozen years or so, naturally her sensitiveness of anxiety about him gets modified, and it is to be feared that she would have taken information of Mr. Meredith’s serious illness, for instance, more easily than the summons which she

feared for one of her boys. She watched every movement of her visitor's face with anxious interest.

'Edward cannot go till the settled time. You know that,' she said, instinctively following the leading of her own thoughts.

'It is not Edward that I have come to speak of; it is neither of the boys.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Meredith, with a sigh of involuntary relief; and she turned to him with cheerful ease and interest, delivered from her chief fear. This evident ignorance of any other cause for animadversion moved the old Spy in spite of himself.

'What I am going to say to you, my dear lady, is not exactly from Meredith—though he has heard of the subject, and wishes me to say something. I hope you will believe there is no harm meant, and that what I do, I do from the best feeling.'

'I have never doubted your kind feeling, Mr. Sommerville; but you half frighten me,' she said, with a smile. 'If it is not the boys, what can there be to be so grave about? Tell me quickly, please.'

Mr. Sommerville cleared his throat. He put his hat upon the head of his cane, and twirled it about. It did not often happen to the old Scotch nabob to be embarrassed; but he was so now.

'You'll understand, my dear lady, that in what I say I'm solely actuated by the thought of your good.'

'How you alarm me!' said Mrs. Meredith. 'It is something, then, very disagreeable?'

'Oh, yes. I've no doubt it will be disagreeable. Medicines are seldom sweet to the palate. Mrs. Meredith, I will out with it at once, not to keep you in suspense.'

Here, however, he paused to take out his handkerchief, and blew his nose with a very resounding utterance. After he had finished this operation he resumed:

'I don't presume to teach a lady of your sense what is her duty; and I don't need to tell you that the world exercises a great supervision over women who, from whatever cause, are left alone.'

'What have I done?' cried Mrs. Meredith, half frightened, half laughing. 'I must have made some mistake, or you would not speak so.'

‘I doubt if it could be called a mistake; perhaps it would be better to say a misapprehension. Mrs. Meredith, there is one of your friends who pays you a visit every day.’

‘Several,’ she said, relieved. ‘You know how kind people are to me. Instead of supervision, as you say, I get a great deal of sympathy——’

Mr. Sommerville waved his hand, as if to ward off her explanation. ‘I am speaking of one person,’ he said: ‘a man—who is here every evening of his life, or I’m mistaken—your neighbour, Mr. Beresford, next door.’

‘Mr. Beresford!’ she said, with a thrill of disagreeable surprise; and there came to her instantaneously one of those sudden realisations of things that might be thought or said, such as sometimes overwhelm the unsuspecting soul at the most inappropriate moment; her colour rose in spite of herself.

‘Just Mr. Beresford. He means no harm and you mean no harm; but he should be put a stop to, my dear lady. You gave me your word you would not be angry. But, madam, you’re a married lady, and your husband is at a distance. It’s not for your credit or his good that he should visit you every night.’

‘Mr. Sommerville! stop, please! I cannot let you talk so—or anyone.’

‘But you must, my dear lady, unless you want everybody to talk, and in a very different spirit. The world is a wicked world, and takes many things into its head. You’re a very attractive woman still, though you’re no longer in your first youth——’

‘Mr. Sommerville, what you say is very disagreeable to me,’ said Mrs. Meredith, offended. ‘Poor Mr. Beresford! since he lost his wife he has been miserable. Nobody ever mourned more truly; and now, when he is trying to learn a little resignation, a little patience——’

‘He should not learn those virtues, madam, at your expense.’

‘At my expense!’ she said, with sparkling eyes; ‘at what expense to me? I allow him to come and sit with me when he has no one at home to bear him company. I allow him——’

‘I thought his daughter had come to keep him company.’

‘Poor Cara! she is a sweet child; but, at seventeen, what can she know of his troubles?’

'Softly, softly,' said Mr. Sommerville; 'one plea is enough at a time. If Mr. Beresford is without a companion, it does not matter that his daughter is only seventeen; and whatever her age may be, if she is there he cannot be without companionship. My dear lady, be reasonable. If he has a child grown up, or nearly so, he should stay at home. A great many of us have not even that inducement,' said the old man, who was an old bachelor; 'but no kind lady opens her doors to us.' He looked at her sharply with his keen eyes; and she felt, with intense annoyance, that she was getting agitated and excited in spite of herself.

'Mr. Sommerville,' she said, with some dignity, 'if anyone has been misrepresenting my friendship for Mr. Beresford, I cannot help that. It is wicked as well as unkind; for I think I have been of use to him. I think I have helped him to see that he cannot abandon his life. I don't mean to defend myself. I have not done anything to be found fault with; friendship——'

'Is a delusion,' said the old man. 'Friendship between a man and a woman! There is no sense in it. I don't believe a word of it. Meaning no harm to you, my dear lady. You don't mean any harm; but if you talk to me of friendship!'

'Then I had better say nothing,' she answered quickly. 'My husband's representative—if you call yourself so—has no right to treat me with rudeness. I have nothing more to say.'

'My dear lady,' said old Mr. Sommerville, 'if I have appeared rude I am unpardonable. But you'll forgive me? I mean nothing but your good. And all I want is a little prudence—the ordinary precautions.'

'I will none of them!' she said, with a flush of indignation. 'I have nothing to be afraid of, and I will not pretend to be prudent, as you call it. Let the world think or say what it pleases—it is nothing to me.'

Then there was a pause, and Mrs. Meredith betook herself to her work—a woman's safety-valve, and laboured as if for a wager, while the old plenipotentiary sat opposite to her, confounded and abashed, as she thought. But Mr. Sommerville was too old and experienced to be much abashed by anything. He sat silent, collecting his forces for a renewed attack. That was all. He had a sincere friendship for her in his way, and was as anxious to prevent scandal as any father could have

been; and now it occurred to him that he had begun at the wrong end, as he said. Women were kittle cattle. He had failed when he dwelt upon the danger to herself. Perhaps he might succeed better if he represented the danger to *him*.

‘I have made a mistake,’ said the hypocritical old man. ‘It can do no harm to you, all that has come and gone. I was thinking of my own selfish kind that give most weight to what affects themselves, and—I am rightly punished. A lady *sans reproche* like yourself may well be *sans peur*. But that is not the whole question, my dear madam. There is the man to be considered.’

When he said this she raised her eyes, which had been fixed on her work, and looked at him with some anxiety, which was so much gained.

‘You will not doubt my word when I say there’s a great difference between men and women,’ said the old diplomatist. ‘What is innocent for one is often very dangerous for the other, and *vice versa*: you will not deny that.’

Then he made a pause, and looking at her for reply, received a sign of assent to his vague proposition, which indeed was safe enough.

‘How can you tell that Mr. Beresford receives as pure benevolence all the kindness you show him? It is very unusual kindness. You are kind to everybody, madam, above the ordinary level; and human creatures are curious—they think it is their merit that makes you good to them, not your own bounty.’

She did not make any reply, but continued to look at him. Her attention at least was secured.

‘If I were to tell you the instances of this that have come under my own observation! I have known a poor creature who got much kindness in a house on account of his defects and deficiencies, and because everybody was sorry for him; who gave it out, if you’ll believe me, and really thought, that what his kind friends wanted was to marry him to the daughter of the house! It’s not uncommon, and I dare say, without going further, that you can remember things—which perhaps you have laughed at——’

‘All this has nothing to do with Mr. Beresford,’ she said, quietly, but with a flush of rising offence.

‘No, no.’ He made a hesitating answer and looked at her. Mrs. Meredith fell into the snare.

‘If he has misunderstood my sympathy for his troubles, if he has ventured to suppose——’

‘Cara has gone out with her aunt,’ said Edward, coming in hastily; ‘but there is surely something wrong in the house. Mr. Beresford called me into his room, looking very much distressed. He told me to tell you that he thought of leaving home directly; then changed his mind, and said I was not to tell you.’

‘Why *do* you tell me then?’ cried his mother, with impatience. ‘What is it to me where he is going? Am I always to be worried with other people’s troubles? I think I have plenty of my own without that.’

Edward looked at her with great surprise. Such out-breaks of impatience from his gentle mother were almost unknown to him. ‘He looks very ill,’ he said: ‘very much disturbed: something must have happened. Why should not I tell you? Are you not interested in our old friend? Then something very extraordinary *has* happened, I suppose?’

‘Oh, my boy,’ cried Mrs. Meredith, in her excitement, ‘that is what Mr. Sommerville has come about. He says poor James Beresford comes too often here. He says I am too kind to him, and that people will talk, and he himself thinks—— Ah!’ she cried suddenly, ‘what am I saying to the boy?’

Edward went up to her hurriedly and put his arm round her, and thus standing looked round defiant at the meddler. Oswald, too, entered the room at this moment. The hour for luncheon approached, and naturally called these young men, still in the first bloom of their fine natural appetites, from all corners of the house. ‘What’s the matter?’ he said. But he had another verse of his poem in his head which he was in great haste to write down, and he crossed over to the writing-table in the back drawing-room, and did not wait for any reply. Edward, on the contrary, put the white shield of his own youthfulness at once in front of his mother, and indignant met the foe.

‘People have talked a long time, I suppose,’ said Edward, ‘that there was nobody so kind as my mother; and I suppose because you have trained us, mamma, we don’t understand what it means to be too kind. You do, sir?’ cried the young man with generous impertinence; ‘you think it is possible to be too innocent—too good?’

'Yes, you young idiot!' cried the old man, jumping up in a momentary fury. Then he cooled down and reseated himself with a laugh. 'There is the bell for lunch,' he said; 'and I don't mean to be cheated out of the luncheon, which, of course, you will give me, by the freaks of these puppies of yours, madam. But Oswald is a philosopher; he takes it easy,' he added, looking keenly at the placid indifference of the elder son.

'Oswald takes everything easy,' said Mrs. Meredith, with a sigh. And they went downstairs to luncheon, and no man could have been more cheerful, more agreeable than the old Indian. He told them a hundred stories, and paid Mrs. Meredith at least a score of compliments. 'This indulgence will put it out of my power to be at your levée this afternoon,' he said; 'but there will be plenty of worshippers without me. I think the neglected women in this town—and no doubt there's many—should bring a prosecution against ladies like you, Mrs. Meredith, that charm more than your share; and both sexes alike, men and women. I hear but one chorus, "There's nobody so delightful as Mrs. Meredith," wherever I go.'

'We are all proud of your approbation,' said Oswald, with much solemnity: he was always light-hearted, and had no desire to inquire particularly into the commotion of which he had been a witness. But Edward kept his eyes upon his mother, who was pale with the excitement she had come through. What that excitement meant the young man had very little idea. Something had disturbed her, which was enough for her son; and, curiously enough, something had disturbed the neighbours too, whom Edward accepted without criticism as we accept people whom we have known all our lives. He was curious, and rather anxious, wondering what it might be.

But as for Mrs. Meredith, the idea of communicating to her sons even the suggestion that she could be spoken of with levity, or criticised as a woman, appalled her when she thought of it. She had cried out, appealing to the boys in her agitation, but the moment after felt that she could bear anything rather than make them aware that anyone had ventured upon a word to her on such subjects. She exerted herself to be as vivacious as her visitor; and as vivacity was not in her way, the little forced gaiety of her manner attracted the attention of

her sons more than the greatest seriousness would have done. Even Oswald was roused to observe this curious change. 'What has happened?' he said to his brother. He thought the Spy had been finding fault with the expenditure of the household, and thought with alarm of his own bills, which had a way of coming upon him as a surprise when he least expected them. It was almost the only thing that could have roused him to interest, for Oswald felt the things that affected Oswald to be of more importance than anything else could be. As for Edward, he awaited somewhat tremulously the disclosure which he expected after Mr. Sommerville's departure. But Mrs. Meredith avoided both of them in the commotion of her feelings. She shut herself up in her own room to ponder the question, and, as was natural, her proud impulse of resistance yielded to reflection. Her heart ached a good deal for poor Beresford, a little for herself. She, too, would miss something. Something would be gone out of her life which was good and pleasant. Her heart gave a little sob, a sudden ache came into her being. Was there harm in it? she asked herself, aghast. Altogether the day was not a pleasant one for Mrs. Meredith. It seemed to plunge her back into those agitations of youth from which surely middle age ought to deliver a woman. It wronged her in her own eyes, making even her generous temper a shame to her. Had she been too good: as he said—too kind? an accusation which is hurtful, and means something like insult to a woman, though to no other creature. Too kind! No expression of contempt, no insinuated slander can be more stinging than this imputation of having been too kind. Had she been too kind to her sorrowful neighbour? had she led him to believe that her kindness was something more than kindness? She, whose special distinction it was to be kind, whose daily court was established on no other foundation, whose kindness was the breath of her nostrils; was this quality, of which she had come to be modestly conscious, and of which, perhaps, she was a little proud, to be the instrument of her humiliation? She was not a happy wife, nor indeed a wife at all, except in distant and not very pleasant recollection, and in the fact that she had a watchful husband, at the end of the world, keeping guard over her. Was it possible that she had given occasion for his interference, laid herself open to his scorn? It seemed to the poor woman as if heaven and earth had leagued against her. Too kind; suspected by the jealous

man who watched her, despised by the ungrateful man by whom her tender generosity had been misinterpreted! She sent down a message to Cara that she was not going out. She sent word to her visitors that she had a headache. She saw nobody all day long. Too kind! The accusation stung in the tenderest point, and was more than she could bear.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN IDEALIST.

WHEN Agnes Burchell encountered Oswald Meredith, as has been recorded, she had but recently taken up her abode at the 'House.' She had gone there much against the will of her family, actuated by that discontent which many generations may have felt, but only the present generation has confessed and justified. Agnes was the eldest daughter of a very prosaic pair, born in a very prosaic household, and how it was that the ideal had caught her in its tenacious grip nobody knew. In the Rectory at the foot of the hill, noisy with children, greasy with bread and butter, between a fat father who prosed and a stout mother who grumbled, the girl had set her heart, from the very beginning of conscious sentiment in her, upon some more excellent way. How this was to be reached she had not been able to divine for years, and many pious struggles had poor Agnes against her own better desires, many attempts to subdue herself and to represent to herself that the things she had to do were her duty and the best things for her. Between exhortations to the service of God in its most spiritual sense, and exhortations to be contented 'in that condition of life to which God had called her,' her heart was rent and her life distracted. Was there, indeed, nothing better in the world than to cut the bread and butter, like Werther's Charlotte, to darn the stockings, to listen to parish gossip and her mother's standing grievance, which was that Cherry Beresford, an old maid, should be well off and drive about in her carriage, while she, the Rector's wife, went painfully afoot—and her father's twaddle about the plague of Dissenters and the wickedness of curates? Agnes tried very hard to accommodate herself to these circumstances of her lot. She tried to change the tone of the family talk, making

herself treemely disagreeable to everybody in so doing. She tried to reduce the children to obedience and to bring order into the unruly house, and in so doing got herself soundly rated by everybody. Who was she that she should take upon her to be superior to her neighbours—to set them all right? The rest of the Burchells were very comfortable in their state of hugger-mugger, and that she should pretend a dislike to it aggravated them all deeply—while all the time she was informed, both in sermons and in good books, that to do the duty nearest to your hand was the most heroic Christian duty. Poor Agnes could not see her way to do any duty at all. There were three sisters over sixteen, more than could be employed upon the stockings and the bread and butter. Then she tried the parish, but found with humiliation that with neither soup, nor puddings, nor little bottles of wine, nor even tracts to carry about, her visits were but little prized. Louisa, her next sister, answered better in every way than she did: when Louisa was scolded she scolded back again in a filial manner, having the last word always. She boxed the children's ears, and pushed them about, and read a novel—when she could get one—in an untidy room, with unkempt brothers and sisters round, and took no notice; neither the disobedience, nor the untidiness, nor even unjust reproof when it came her way having any particular effect upon her. Louisa did what she was obliged to do, and knew nothing about the ideal. But Agnes did not know what to make of herself. She was called by absurd nicknames of mock respect by the others—the 'princess' and 'your royal highness,' and so forth; and Mrs. Burchell seldom lost an opportunity of saying, 'Agnes thinks she knows better, of course; but my old-fashioned ways are good enough for the rest of us.' Thus year after year went over her young head, each one increasing her inappropriateness—the want of any fit place for her where she was. It was against the pride of the family that she should go out as a governess, and, indeed, she was not sufficiently educated herself to teach anyone else. She was at the very height of discomfort when there dawned upon her the prospect of doing something better in the 'House,' serving the poor, teaching the untaught. The Rectory was very full at the time, and her room was much wanted for an uncle who was coming to pay a visit; but yet, notwithstanding this great immediate convenience, there was much resistance made.

Mr. Burchell's Church politics were undecided. He was only entering upon the path of Ritualism, starting mildly under the guidance of a curate, with Saint's-day services, and the beginning of a choir; and the name of a Sisterhood frightened him. As for Mrs. Burchell, her indignation knew no bounds. 'Your duty is at home, you ungrateful girl, where your father and I have stinted ourselves to let you have everything that is comfortable. And now you go and leave me to work night and day among the children. I who have no strength for it——' 'There is Louisa, mamma,' said Agnes; upon which Louisa cried with indignation, and asked if *everything* was to be left upon her—and all the little boys and girls looked on from the corners with demure delight to watch the progress of the 'slindy' between Agnes and mamma. At last, however, after many scenes of this kind, Agnes was allowed to go free. She went to London, and set herself up with a modified uniform, and was as glad and triumphant as if it was the noblest vocation in the world which she had thus struggled into. Alas! it was not very long before the bonds of the prosaic earth again galled her, and the ideal seemed as far off as ever. Ignoble breakfasts and dinners and teas are as ignoble in a charitable 'House' as in an overcrowded Rectory; and here, too, there was gossip and unruliness, and want of discipline, and very poor success in the elevation of life out of its beggarly elements. To teach children their A B C is not an inspiring occupation, even when the children are destitute and orphans. It was so hard to realise that they were so. The poor little wretches were just as tiresome and insubordinate as if they had been her own brothers and sisters: nothing of the sentiment of their position hung about them. And the Sisters were extremely business-like, and did their duty without a tinge of romance, as if they had been hired to do it. The awakening had been sharp for Agnes, but she had already got beyond the first stage, and was now fighting with her disappointment and arguing herself back into satisfaction. It was impossible to tell what a help to her was the breaking of little Emmy's leg. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. She would have liked to nurse her altogether, but at least to go to her to the hospital, to cheer her, and whisper consolation—that was something; and when the child's face brightened at her coming, Agnes, with a sudden throb of her heart, felt that at

least for the moment here was the ideal for which she had sighed. Here was some real good of her. But for her nobody would have visited little Emmy: they would have been content to hear that she was doing well: that smile of half-celestial happiness upon the poor little sick face would never have reflected heaven but for Agnes. It was the first approach to contentment in her own occupation which she had ever felt. And she had to work all the harder to get herself this pleasure, which made her satisfaction still more warm.

But—whether it was right to talk to the stranger who was so very much interested in poor little Emmy afterwards!—was that a part of the ideal, too? To be sure he had a right to inquire—he had been present at the accident, and had carried the child in his arms to the hospital—how very kindly!—and talked with what understanding! and an enthusiasm which was balm to Agnes, and partially rekindled her own. That he should ask was quite natural; that he should walk with her back to the ‘House’ had seemed very natural, too. Quite natural—he did not look as if he thought it a thing even to apologize about, but went on, with quiet simplicity, going the same way as she did. Agnes felt that, as a young lady at home, it would have appeared perhaps a little odd that a stranger should have done this; but she reflected with a thrill, half of pleasure, half of annoyance, that the uniform of a Sister had its disadvantages as well as its advantages, and that while it protected her from all rudeness, it at the same time broke the ceremonial bonds of politeness, and left her open to be addressed with frank simplicity by all classes of people. She had thought it right to let him know that she was not a Sister, but only a teacher, but it had made no difference in him. Perhaps (she explained to herself) it was the fact that there were nothing but women at the ‘House,’ which gave a certain piquancy to this conversation with a man; for the clergy, in their cassocks, were but a kind of half and half, and talked just in the same tone as Sister Mary Jane about the business of the ‘House,’ and subscriptions, and the balance-sheet, and what the Vicar thought, which was the final test of everything. Why did she like this stranger so much better than the clergy? It was because his tone and his looks and what he said were a little variety, and breathed of the outside world and the wider horizon. To be sure, it had seemed to her a little while ago that everything noblest and highest was

to be had within the 'House,' where so many consecrated souls were giving themselves up to the service of God and the poor. But being inside had modified the views with which she had contemplated the 'House' from without. The world itself, the wicked and foolish world, though no less foolish and wicked, had gained a certain interest. There was variety in it: it was perhaps more amusing than the 'House.' These thoughts filled the mind of Agnes as the door, which was always kept locked, was closed upon her. The horizon grew narrower as she came in—that was a natural effect, for of course four straight walls must cut out a great deal of sky—but the effect seemed greater than usual that day. She felt shut in; nothing could be easier than to unlock the door, though it looked so heavy—but there was a feeling of confinement somehow in the air. Agnes had to go into the severe Gothic room, with windows high in the wall, where the children were coming in to tea, while Mr. Oswald Meredith walked away in the free air as he pleased, holding his head high. She breathed a soft sigh unawares. Where was the ideal now? There came upon her a vision of the woods and the Hill, and the winding paths that led to it, and of the four winds that were always blowing there, and the leaves that answered to every breath. What a thing it would be to thread through the woods, as she had done so often, with the wind fresh in her face, chill but vigorous, breathing life and exhilaration! How one's ideal shifts and changes about when one is twenty! The 'House' looked poor indeed in the weariful afternoon about the darkening, full of the odour of weak tea.

Things grew very serious, however, next week, when, exactly as it happened before, just as she came out of the hospital from her visit to Emmy, Mr. Oswald Meredith once more appeared. He was both sorry and glad in a breath—sorry to be too late for personal inquiries, glad to have been so fortunate as just to find her—the best authority about the child.

'I felt sure you would be going to see her,' he said. 'Little Emmy is a lucky little girl. May I hear how she is getting on? though I scarcely deserve it for being so late.'

He turned as he spoke to walk with her, and what could Agnes do? She could not refuse to answer him, or show any prudery. He evidently (she said to herself) thought nothing of it; why should she appear to demur to anything so simple?

Give a report about a suffering child? Anyone might do that—to anyone. And she told him that Emmy was making satisfactory progress, though she had been feverish and ill. ‘I was a little frightened, though the nurse said it was nothing. She wandered, and spoke so strangely for a little while. Poor little Emmy! She had a beautiful dream, and thought herself in heaven.’

‘While you were there?’ said Oswald, with a significance in the simple question which covered her face with a sudden blush. Then she blushed deeper still to think what foolish, unpardonable vanity this was—vanity the most extraordinary, the most silly! What he meant, *of course*, was a simple question, most natural—an inquiry about a fact, not any wicked compliment. How Agnes hated and despised herself for the warm suffusion of shy pleasure which she had felt in her heart and on her face!

‘Yes,’ she said, demurely; ‘but she soon roused up and came quite to herself. She had been in great pain, and they had given her something to deaden it, that was all.’

‘I quite understand,’ he said, with again that appearance of meaning more than he said. No doubt it was merely his way; and it was embarrassing, but not so disagreeable as perhaps it ought to have been. Agnes kept her head down, and slightly turned away, so that this stranger could not see the inappropriate blushes which came and went under the bonnet of the Sisterhood. Then there was a pause; and she wondered within herself whether it would be best to turn down a cross-street and feign an errand, which would take her out of the straight road to the ‘House’—evidently that was *his* way—and by this means she might escape his close attendance. But then, to invent a fictitious errand would be unquestionably wrong; whereas, to allow a gentleman whom she did not know to walk along the public pavement, to which everybody had an equal right, by her side, was only problematically wrong. Thus Agnes hesitated, in a flutter, between two courses. So long as they were not talking it seemed more simple that he should be walking the same way.

‘What a strange world a hospital must be,’ he said. ‘I have been watching the people coming out’ (‘Then he was not late, after all,’ Agnes remarked to herself), ‘some of them pleased, some anxious, but the most part indifferent. Indifference always carries the day. Is that why the world goes on

so steadily, whatever happens? Here and there is one who shows some feeling——'

'It is because the greater part of the patients are not very ill,' said Agnes, responding instantly to this challenge. 'Oh, no, people are not indifferent. I know that is what is said—that we eat our dinners in spite of everything——'

'And don't we? or, rather, don't they? Ourselves are always excepted, I suppose,' said Oswald, delighted to have set afloat one of those abstract discussions which young talkers, aware of a pleasant faculty of turning sentences, love.

'Why should ourselves be excepted? said Agnes, forgetting her shyness. 'Why should it always be supposed that we who speak are better than our neighbours? Oh, I have seen so much of that! people who know only a little, little circle setting down all the rest of the world as wicked. Why? If I am unhappy when anyone I love is in trouble, that is a reason for believing that others are so too; not that others are indifferent——'

'Ah,' said Oswald, 'to judge the world by yourself would be well for the world, but disappointing for you, I fear. I am an optimist, too; but I would not go so far as that.'

She gave him a sudden look, half-inquiring, half-impatient. 'One knows more harm of one's self than one can know of anyone else,' she said, with the dogmatism of youth.

He laughed. 'I see now why you judge people more leniently than I do. What quantities of harm *I* must know that *you* could not believe possible! What is life like, I wonder, up on those snowy heights so near the sky?—a beautiful soft psalm, with just a half-tone wrong here and there to show that it is outside heaven——'

'Indeed, indeed, you are mistaken! I—I am not a Sister—you mistake me,' said Agnes, in agitation. 'It is only the dress——'

'You are doing just what you condemn,' he said; 'setting me down as a superficial person able to judge only by the outside. I have superior pretensions. Is my friend Sister Mary Jane the Superior of the convent? But I suppose you don't call it a convent? I have only known them in France.'

'We call it only "the House"; but I have never been in France—never out of England at all. Is it not like going into a different world?' Agnes took up this subject eagerly, to escape the embarrassment of the other; and fortunately the House itself was already in sight.

‘The very same world, only differently dressed. I suppose there is something harmonious in a uniform. All the nuns have a kind of beauty, not the pensive kind one expects; or perhaps it is the white head-dress and the calm life that give the Sisters such pretty complexions, and such clear eyes. Sister Mary Jane, for instance—you will allow that the Sisters are calm——’

‘But not indifferent!’ said Agnes, moved to an answering smile, as they reached the safe door of the House. She threw that smile at him as a farewell defiance as she went up to the locked door which opened to her with an alarming sound of keys turning, like the door of a true convent of romance, though it was in a London street. He lingered, but she did not look back. She was very thankful to reach that safe shelter, and find herself delivered from the doubtful privilege of his attendance. And yet somehow the afternoon darkened suddenly, the sky clouded over as she went in, and her heart sank she could not tell how. Why should her heart sink? She had scarcely got indoors before she was met by Sister Mary Jane, who asked for little Emmy with business-like brevity; then, just pausing for a reply, went on to talk of work, the subject which filled all her thoughts.

‘Go, please, and take care of the middle girls at relaxation; they are in St. Cecilia; and keep your eye on Marian Smith, who has already lost five marks for untidiness; and Araminta Blunt, who is in punishment for talking. And see that relaxation is ended, and they all begin learning their lessons at 6.30. I must take the elder girls myself for an hour before evensong. Have you had tea?’ said Sister Mary Jane. ‘No? Then go quickly, please, my dear, and have some. It is not cleared away yet. The infants have been rather unruly, and I mean to speak to the Vicar about it this evening. We want someone else to help with the infants. In St. Cecilia, yes. Make haste, my dear.’

Agnes went into the large room which was called the refectory—the banqueting-hall of the establishment—where the air was heavy with tea and bread and butter, and the long tables, partially cleared, still bore traces of the repast. It was a large room; the walls enlivened with Spiritual pictures, and rich with lines of coloured bricks unplastered. The servants of the House were not of a very superior class, as may be supposed, and to see them pushing about the cups

and saucers, rattling down the heavy trays full of fragments, and hustling each other about the tables, was not exhilarating. How closed in and confined everything looked, how dreary the atmosphere, the evening so much more advanced than out of doors! Agnes tried to drink with contentment her lukewarm cup of tea, and to think with satisfaction of the middle girls who awaited her in St. Cecilia. But it was astonishing how difficult she felt it to do this. The summer afternoon skies, the soft breathing of the spring air, the long distances—though they were but lines of streets—and wide atmosphere—though it was tinged with London smoke—which lay outside these walls, had suggested sentiments so different. The sentiments which they would have suggested to Sister Mary Jane would have been quite unlike those that filled the mind of Agnes. She would have said it was a sweet evening, and hurried in to work. The smell of the tea did not sicken her, nor the sight of the used cups and the stains here and there on the cloth, where an unruly child (doomed to lose her marks for neatness) had pulled over her cup. She thought that to superintend the middle girls at relaxation was as pleasant an occupation as could be found—and that a walk through the streets was a weariness to the flesh. As for Mr. Oswald Meredith, except that it was very nice of him to have given such a good subscription to the House, she would not have considered him worthy a glance—her mind was busy about other things. She had to take the girls for an hour before evensong, and afterwards had to look over their exercises and inspect the books, and hear the reports of the teachers. Araminta Blunt, who was in punishment for talking, and Marian Smith, who had lost five marks for untidiness, were of more interest to her than all the ideals in the world. She was very kind to fanciful Agnes, as well as to everybody else, but she had no time to indulge in fancies for her own part. She gave her directions to one and another as she went along the passage. There was not a minute of her valuable time which she could afford to lose. Agnes thought of all this with a sigh as she went to St. Cecilia, where the middle girls awaited her. Would she ever be as satisfied with her work, as pleased with her surroundings, as Sister Mary Jane? And was it not her duty to endeavour to make herself so? For she could not say to herself as she had done at home that this was mere carelessness and apathetic resignation to the common

course of events. Here, on the contrary, it was self-sacrifice that was the rule, and consecration to the service of the helpless. The poor girl was young; perhaps that was the chief drawback in her way. The softness of the skies, the speculative delights of conversation, the look of Oswald Meredith as he spoke of 'the snowy heights so near the sky,' what had these mere chance circumstances, which she had encountered unawares, to do with the serious life which she had herself selected as the best? And, alas! was St. Cecilia, with the girls at relaxation, anything like those 'snowy heights?' The little squabbles, the little fibs, the little jealousies which the children indulged in none the less for being in the interesting position of orphans, helpless and friendless children, with no father but God, jarred upon her more and more as this poetical imagination of her life came back to her mind. Surely he must be a poet. This was her concluding thought.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE 'HOUSE.'

ROGER had not renewed his visit to Cara for some weeks. He had been too much cast down and discouraged by that first Sunday for which he had prepared so elaborately, and looked forward to with so much eagerness. But discouragement, like everything else, wears out, and when he had gone round the circle from anger to disapproval, from disapproval to contempt, from contempt to pity, Roger found himself with some surprise back at his original point, longing to see Cara, and ready to believe that anything that had come between them had been accidental. The two Merediths would not be there for ever, and Cara no doubt, poor girl, must be pining for someone from her old home, and would be glad to see him, and hear all that everybody was doing. He was sorry he had said a word to his mother about what happened in the Square; indeed he had done nothing but regret ever since the indiscretion which tempted him to complain; for Mrs. Burchell was one of those inconvenient persons who never forget the indignant criticisms of injured feeling, but continue to repeat and harp upon it long after that feeling has

sunk into oblivion or changed into contempt. Very soon the softening influences of his early love, and the longing he had after the object of it, made Roger forgive Cara all her imagined sins against him; but his mother could not forget that he had been slighted, and punished his betrayal of his wound by incessant reference to the evils in the Square. This of itself helped on his recovery, since to find fault yourself with those to whom you are attached is a very different thing from hearing them assailed by others. The process ended by a serious quarrel with Mrs. Burchell, who would not give up this favourite subject, and taunted her son with his want of proper pride, and inclination to put up with anything, when she heard of his intention to go back. 'If I had been so treated anywhere, I would never go near them again. I would not invite people to trample upon me,' cried the Rector's wife. 'I might forgive, but I should never forget.' 'My dear,' the Rector had said, 'Roger has himself to look to: we are not able to do very much for him; and Cara will be a kind of heiress. I should not mind any trifle of that sort, if he has serious views.' 'What do you call serious views?' cried Roger, ashamed and wretched, and he plunged out of the house without waiting for an answer, and betook himself to those wintry woods of which Agnes was thinking at the 'House,' and which even in winter were sweet. Roger had no sordid intentions, which was what his father meant by 'serious' views; and though he was well enough satisfied with his daily work, and not, like Agnes, troubled by any ideal, yet he felt, like his sister, the wretched downfall of existence into misery and meanness, between his mother's prolonged and exaggerated resentment and his father's serious worldliness. That boyish love of his was the highest thing in the young man's mind. If nothing else that was visionary existed in his nature, his semi-adoration of Cara, which had lasted as long as he could recollect, was visionary, a touch of poetry amid his prose, and to hear it opposed, or to hear it sordidly encouraged alike shocked and revolted him. He resolved never to mention Cara's name again, nor to make any reference to the Square, to shut up his sentiments about her in his own bosom, whether these were sentiments of admiration or of offence. Supposing she was cold to him—and it would be very natural that she should be cold, as he had never gone back to her, nor visited her but once—he

would bear it and make no sign; never again would he subject her name to comments such as these. Fathers and mothers do badly by their children when they force them to such a resolution. Roger kept his word all through the weary Sunday, and did not say even that he would not return home for the next; but he made his arrangements all the same.

When the next Sunday came the heart of the aunt at Notting Hill was once more gladdened by the sight of him; and in the afternoon he duly set out for the Square. Perhaps his dress was not so elaborate nor his necktie so remarkable as when he first went there. He had sworn to himself that he would form no special expectations and make no grand preparations, and on the whole he was happier on his second visit. Miss Cherry, whom he found at the Square, was very glad to see him, and Mr. Beresford spoke to him kindly enough, and Cara was sweet and friendly. But they treated his visit as a call only; they did not ask him to dinner, which was a disappointment. They offered him a cup of tea, which Roger did not care for, being scarcely fashionable enough to like five o'clock tea, and let him go when they went to dinner, forlorn enough, turning him out as it were upon the streets full of people. To be sure Roger had his aunt at Notting Hill, who was very glad to see him, who would give him supper and make him very comfortable. Still, as he had hoped perhaps to be asked to stay, to spend the evening with Cara, it gave him a very forlorn sensation, when they bade him cheerfully good-by at the sound of the dinner-bell. He went out into the evening streets, where many people were going to church, and many coming back from their afternoon walk, going home to their families in twos and threes. Scarcely anyone seemed to be alone but himself. Still he said to himself he had no right to grumble, for they had been kind—and next Sunday he would go again; and with this melancholy yet courageous resolution he made a little pause at the corner of the street, asking himself where he should go now? His aunt would have taken tea and gone to evening church before he could get to Notting Hill. So he changed his direction and went manfully the other way, to the 'House,' to visit his sister, arguing his disappointment down. Why should they have asked him to dinner? Besides, he did not go for dinner, which would have been mercenary, but for Cara—and he had

seen Cara, without those Merediths thrusting themselves into his way; and she had been very kind, and Miss Cherry had been kind, and there was no reason why he should not go again next Sunday afternoon. So why should he be discouraged? There was Agnes, whom he had not seen since she had gone into this 'House,' as they called it. It was only right that a man should go and look after his own sister, even if he did not approve of her. So Roger employed his undesired hour of leisure in the way of duty, and went to see Agnes, gradually calming himself down out of his disappointment on the way.

The Burchells were not what is called a family devoted to each other. They were good enough friends, and took a proper brotherly and sisterly interest in what happened to each other, especially as every new piece of family news brought a certain amount of enlivenment and variety and a new subject for conversation into the monotonous family life; but they were prosaic, and Agnes was the one among them whom the others did not understand much, and not understanding, set down bluntly as fantastic and incomprehensible. Had she fallen in love with somebody or had a 'disappointment,' they would have entered to a certain degree into her feelings, and even now Roger could not quite divest himself of the thought, that, though he knew nothing of it, something of this kind must be at the root of her withdrawal from home. An ideal life, what was that? Neither Roger nor any of the rest understood what she could mean, or really believed that there was any sincerity in such a pretext; and he indeed was one of those who had been most opposed to her purpose; asking scornfully what advantage she supposed she was to get by going among strangers? Was she better than the other girls, that she could not make herself comfortable at home? Was there not plenty to do there, if that was what she wanted? Was there not the parish, if she wanted more work? Roger had been alike indignant and astonished. But the thing was done, and he was in town, not very far off from where she was, with an hour or two to spare. He went with a secret antagonism against everything he was likely to see. The very name of the place nettled him. The 'House!' as if it was a penitentiary or shelter for the destitute, which *his* sister had been obliged to find refuge in. He was admitted on giving full particulars as to who he was, and ushered into

the bare little room, covered with dusty matting, with religious prints of the severest character on the walls, and bookshelves full of school-books. St. Monica was emblazoned on the door of it, which name offended him too. Could not the foolish people call it the brown room, or the matted room, or by any common appellation, instead of by the name of a saint, whom nobody had ever heard of? Agnes came to him, not in the dress which she wore out of doors, but in a simple black gown, fortunately for her, for what avalanche of objections would have tumbled upon her head had she come in to him in her cape and poke-bonnet! He was pleased to see his sister and pleased by her delight at the sight of him, but yet he could not smooth his brow out of displeasure. It gave him an outlet for the subdued irritation with which he had received his dismissal from the Square.

'Well, Agnes,' he said, 'so here you are in this papistical place. I had an hour to spare, and I thought I would come and see you.'

'I am so glad to see you, Roger. I was just thinking of them all at home.'

'At home! You were anxious enough to get away from home. I wish anyone knew why. I can't fancy anything so unnatural as a girl wishing to leave home, except on a visit, or if she is going to be married, or that sort of thing—but to come to a place like this! Agnes, I am sure there is no one belonging to you who knows why.'

'Yes,' said Agnes, quietly, 'because I wanted to do something more, to do some duty in the world, not to be like a vegetable in the garden.'

'That is just the slang of the period,' said wise Roger. 'You can't say there is not plenty to do with all the children to look after; and one never can get a button sewed on now.'

'Louisa and Liddy were quite able to do all and more than all—why should there be three of us sewing on buttons? And what were we to come to—nothing but buttons all our lives?'

'Why, I suppose,' said Roger, doubtfully—'what do girls ever come to? You would have been married some time.'

'And that is such a delightful prospect!' cried Agnes, moved to sarcasm. 'Oh, Roger, is it such an elevated life to jog along as papa—as we have seen people do, thinking of nothing but how to get through the day, and pay the bills,

and have a good dinner when we can, and grumble at our neighbours, the children running wild, and the house getting shabby?' said Agnes, unconsciously falling into portraiture, 'and talking about the service of God? What is the service of God? Is it just to be comfortable and do what you are obliged to do?'

'Well, I suppose it is not to make yourself uncomfortable,' cried Roger, shirking the more serious question. 'Though, as for that, if you wished, you could be quite uncomfortable enough at home. What do they mean by calling a room after a woman, St. Monica? and all these crucifixes and things—and that ridiculous dress—I am glad to see you have the sense not to wear it here at least.'

'I wear it when I go out; it is not ridiculous; one can go where one pleases, that is, wherever one is wanted, in a Sister's dress, and the roughest people always respect it,' said Agnes, warmly. 'Oh, Roger, why should you be so prejudiced? Do you know what kind of people are here? Poor helpless, friendless children, that have got no home, and the Sisters are like mothers to them. Is that no good? What does it matter about the name of the room, if a poor destitute baby is fed and warmed, and made happy in it? Children that would starve and beg and rob in the streets, or die—that would be the alternative, if these Sisters with their absurd dresses and their ridiculous ways, that make you so angry, did not step in.'

'Well, I suppose they may do some good,' said Roger, unwillingly. 'You need not get so hot about it; but you might do just as much good with less fuss. And why should you shut yourself up in a penitentiary as if you had done something you were ashamed of? Why should you slave and teach for your living? We are not so poor as that. If the brothers all work,' said Roger, with a not unbecoming glow of pride, 'there ought always to be plenty for the sisters at home.'

'But I must live my life too, as well as my brothers; and do what I can before the night comes,' said Agnes, with a little solemnity, 'when no man can work.'

Roger was subdued by the quotation more than by all her reasons. He could not, as he said to himself, go against Scripture, which certainly did exhort every man to work before the night cometh. Did that mean every woman too?

'The short and the long of it is,' he said, half sulkily, half melted, 'that you were never content at home, Agnes. Are you contented here?'

That was a home question. Agnes shrank a little and faltered, avoiding a direct reply.

'You do not look very contented yourself. Have you been to see Cara?' she said. 'How is she? I have not heard a word of her since I came here.'

'Oh, Cara is well enough. She is not like you, setting up for eccentric work. She is quite happy at home. Miss Cherry is there at present, looking after her. It is a handsome house, choke full of china and things. And I suppose, from all I hear, she has a very jolly life,' said Roger, with a certain shade of moroseness creeping over his face, 'parties and lots of friends.'

'I daresay she does not forget the people she used to like, for all that,' said Agnes, more kind than he was, and divining the uncontent in his face.

'Oh, I don't know. There are some people who never leave her alone, who pretend to be old friends too,' said Roger, ruefully. 'And they live next door, worse luck; they are always there. Other old friends have no chance beside these Merediths.'

'Oh!—is their name Meredith?'

'Yes; do you know them? There is one, a palavering fellow, talks twenty to the dozen, and thinks no end of himself—a sneering beggar. I don't mind the other so much; but that Oswald fellow——'

'Oh!—is his name Oswald?'

'I believe you know him. Do swells like that come a-visiting here?'

'Oh, no,' said Agnes, anxiously smoothing down suspicion; 'there is a name—much the same—in Sister Mary Jane's list of subscriptions. Oh, yes; and the gentleman carried a poor child to the hospital so very kindly. I noticed the name, because—because there is a poet called Oswald, or Owen, or something, Meredith. I wondered,' said Agnes, faltering, telling the truth but meaning a fib, 'whether it could be the same.'

'Quite likely,' said Roger; 'the very kind of fellow that would write poetry and stuff—a sentimental duffer. To tell the truth,' he added, with immense seriousness, 'I don't like to

have little Cara exposed to all his rubbishing talk. She is as simple as a little angel, and believes all that's said to her; and when a fellow like that gets a girl into a corner, and whispers and talks stuff——' Roger continued, growing red and wroth.

Agnes did not make any reply. She turned round to examine the school-books with a sudden start—and, oh me! what curious, sudden pang was that, as if an arrow had been suddenly shot at her, which struck right through her heart?

'Cara, should not let anyone whisper to her in corners,' she said at last, with a little sharpness, after her first shock. 'She is too young for anything of that sort; and she is old enough to know better,' she added, more sharply still. But Roger did not notice this contradiction. He was too much interested to notice exactly what was said.

'She is too young to be exposed to all that,' he said, mournfully; 'how is she to find out at seventeen which is false and which is true?' There now, Agnes, see what you might have done, had not you shut yourself up here. Nothing so likely as that Cara would have asked you to go and pay her a visit—and you could have taken care of her. But you know how romantic poor dear Miss Cherry is—and I should not be a bit surprised if that child allowed herself to be taken in, and threw herself away.'

And would this be the fault of Agnes, who had shut herself up in the House, and thus precluded all possibility of being chosen as the guardian and companion of Cara? She smiled a little to herself, not without a touch of bitterness; though, indeed, after all, if help to one's neighbour is the chief thing to be considered in life, it was as worthy a work to take care of Cara as to teach the orphans their A B C. This news of Roger's, however, introduced, he did not well know how, a discord in the talk. He fell musing upon the risk to which his little lady was exposed, and she got distracted with other thoughts. She sat beside him, in her plain, long black gown, every ornament of her girlhood put away from her; her hands, which had been very pretty white hands, loosely clasped on the table before her, and showing some signs of injury. It is only in romances that the hands of women engaged in various household labours retain their beauty all the same. Agnes had now a little of everything thrown in her way to do, and was required not to be squeamish about the uses she put these pretty hands to; and it could not be denied

that they were a little less pretty already. She looked down upon them in her sudden rush of thought and perceived this. What did it matter to the young handmaid of the poor whether or not her hands were as pretty as usual? but yet, with an instantaneous comparison, her mind rushed to Cara, who had no necessity to soil her pretty fingers, and to the contrast which might be made between them. What did it matter that it was wicked and wrong of Agnes, self-devoted and aspiring to be God's servant, to feel like this? The wave of nature was too strong for her, and carried her away.

'Well, I must be going,' said Roger, with a sigh. 'I am glad that I have seen you, and found you—comfortable. There does not seem much here to tempt anyone; but still if you like it—I am coming back next Sunday. Aunt Mary is pleased to have me, and they don't seem to care at home whether one goes or stays. I shall probably look in at the Square. Shall I tell Cara about you? She knows you have gone away from home, but not where you are. She might come to see you.'

'I don't want any visitors,' said Agnes, with a little irritation of feeling, which, with all the rest of her misdeeds, was laid up in her mind to be repented of. 'We have no time for them, for one thing; and half-measures are of little use. If I do not mean to give myself altogether to my work, I had better not have come at all. Do not mention my name to Cara. I don't want to see anyone here.'

'Well, I suppose you are right,' said Roger. 'If one does go in for this sort of thing, it is best to do it thoroughly. What is that fearful little cracked kettle of a bell? You that used to be so particular, and disliked the row of the children, and the loud talking, and the bad music, how can you put up with all this? You must be changed somehow since you came here.'

'I ought to be changed,' said Agnes, with a pang in her heart. Alas, how little changed she was! how the sharp little bell wore her nerves out, and the rustle of the children preparing for chapel, and the clanging of all the doors! She went with Roger to the gate, which had to be unlocked, to his suppressed derision.

'Have you to be locked in?' the irreverent youth said. 'Do they think you would all run away if you had the chance?'

Agnes took no notice of this unkind question. She herself, when she first arrived, had been a little appalled by the big mediæval key, emblem, apparently, of a very tremendous separation from the world; and she would not acknowledge that it meant no more than any innocent latch. When Roger was gone she had to hasten upstairs to get her poke-bonnet, and rush down again to take her place among her orphans for the evening service in the chapel, which the House took pleasure in calling Evensong. She knelt down among the rustling, restless children, while the cracked bell jangled, and a funny little procession of priests and choristers came from the vestry door. They were all the most excellent people in the world, and worthy of reverence in their way; but no procession of theatrical *supers* was ever more quaintly comic than that which solemnly marched half-way round the homely little chapel of the House, chanting a hymn very much out of tune, and ending in the best of curates—a good man, worthy of any crowning, civic or sacred, who loved the poor, and whom the poor loved, but who loved the ceremonial of these comic-solemn processions almost more than the poor. With a simple, complaisant sense of what he was doing for the Church, this good man paced slowly past the kneeling figure of the young teacher, motionless in her black drapery, with her head bent down upon her hands. No mediæval Pope in full certainty of conducting the most impressive ceremonial in the world could have been more sincerely convinced of the solemnising effect of his progress, or more simply impressed by its spiritual grandeur; and no mediæval nun, in passionate penitence over a broken vow, could have been more utterly bowed down and prostrate than poor Agnes Burchell, guilty of having been beguiled by the pleasant voice and pleasant looks of Oswald Meredith into the dawn of innocent interest in that mundane person: she, who had so short time since offered herself to God's service—she, who had made up her mind that to live an ideal life of high duty and self-sacrifice was better than the poor thing which vulgar minds called happiness. The cracked bell tinkled, and the rude choristers chanted, and all the restless children rustled about her, distracting her nerves and her attention. All this outside of devotion, she said to herself, and a heart distracted with vulgar vanities within! Was this the ideal to which she had vowed herself—the dream of a higher life? The children pulled at her black cloak in con-

sternation, and whispered, 'Teacher, teacher !' when the service began, and she had to stumble up to her feet, and try to keep them somewhere near the time in their singing. But her mind was too disturbed to follow the hymn, which was a very ecstatic one about the joys of Paradise. Oh, wicked, wicked Agnes ! what was she doing, she asked herself—a wolf in sheep's clothing amid this angelic band ?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

THIS was a time of great agitation for the two houses so close to each other, with only a wall dividing the troubles of the one from the excitement of the other, and a kind of strange union between them, linking them more closely in the very attempt at disjunction. The greater part of the private commotion which was going on, as it were, underground was concealed from Cara as not a proper subject of discussion before her ; but it was not necessary to take any steps of the kind with Oswald, who, in his light-hearted indifference, ignored it comfortably, and followed his own devices through the whole without giving the other affairs a thought. After all, the idea of anyone exciting him or herself over the question whether a respectable old fogey, like Mr. Beresford, should go on paying perpetual visits to a respectable matron like his mother, touched Oswald's mind with a sense of the ludicrous which surmounted all seriousness. If they liked it, what possible harm could there be ? He had not the uneasy prick of wounded feeling, the sense of profanation which moved Edward at the idea of his mother's conduct being questioned in any way. Oswald was fond of his mother, and proud of her, though he was disposed to smile at her absurd popularity and the admiration she excited among her friends. He would have thought it a great deal more natural that he himself should be the object of attraction ; but, granting the curious taste of society, at which he felt disposed to laugh, it rather pleased him that *his* mother should be so popular, still admired and followed at her age. He thought, like Mr. Sommerville, that she was something of a humbug, getting up that pretence,

of sympathy with everybody, which it was impossible anyone in her senses could feel. But so long as it brought its reward, in the shape of so much friendliness from everybody, and gratitude for the words and smiles, which cost nothing, Oswald, at least, saw no reason to complain. And as for scandal arising about Mr. Beresford! he could not but laugh; at their age! So he pursued his easy way as usual, serenely light-hearted, and too much occupied with his own affairs to care much for other people's. In addition to this, it must be added that Oswald was falling very deep in love. These interviews between the hospital and the House were but meagre fare to feed a passion upon; but the very slightness of the link, the oddity of the circumstances, everything about it delighted the young man, who had already gone through a great many drawing-room flirtations, and required the help of something more piquant. He was very happy while they were all so agitated and uncomfortable. Twice a week were hospital days, at which he might hope to see her; and almost every morning now he managed to cross the path of the little school procession, and, at least see her, if he did not always catch the eye of the demure little teacher in her long cloak. Sometimes she would look at him sternly, sometimes she gave him a semi-indignant, sometimes a wholly friendly glance, sometimes, he feared, did not perceive him at all. But that was not Oswald's fault. He made a point of taking off his hat, and indeed holding it in his hand a moment longer than was necessary, by way of showing his respect, whether she showed any signs of perceiving him or not. She went softly along the vulgar pavement, with steps which he thought he could distinguish among all the others, ringing upon the stones with a little rhythm of her own, about which he immediately wrote some verses. All this he would tell to Cara, coming to her in the morning before he set out to watch the children defiling out of the House. And all the world thought, as was natural, that the subject of these talks was his love for Cara, not his love, confided to Cara, for someone else.

As for Agnes, she not only saw Oswald every time he made his appearance, whether she allowed him to know it or not, but she felt his presence in every nerve and vein, with anger for the first day or two after Roger's visit, then with a softening of all her heart towards him as she caught his reverential glance, his eager appeal to her attention. After all, whispers

to Cara, whom he had known all her life—little Cara, who even to Agnes herself seemed a child—could not mean half so much as this daily haunting of her own walks, this perpetual appearance wherever she was. That was a totally different question from her own struggle not to notice him, not to think of him. The fact that it was shocking and terrible on her part to allow her mind to dwell on any man, or any man's attentions, while occupied in the work to which she had devoted herself, and filling almost the position of a consecrated Sister, was quite a different thing from the question whether he was a false and untrustworthy person, following her with the devices of vulgar pursuit, a thing too impious to think of, too humiliating. Agnes was anxious to acquit the man who admired and sought her, as well as determined to reject his admiration; and, for the moment, the first was actually the more important matter of the two. Herself she could be sure of. She had not put her hand to the plough merely to turn back. She was not going to abandon her ideal at the call of the first lover who held out his hand to her. Surely not; there could be no doubt on that subject; but that this generous, gentle young man, with those poetic sentiments which had charmed yet abashed her mind, that he should be false to his fair exterior, and mean something unlovely and untrue, instead of a real devotion, that was too terrible to believe. Therefore, she did not altogether refuse to reply to Oswald's inquiries when the next hospital day brought about another meeting. This time he did not even pretend that the meeting was accidental, that he had been too late for making the proper inquiries in his own person, but went up to her, eagerly asking for 'our little patient,' with all the openness of a recognised acquaintance.

'Emmy is better—if you mean Emmy,' said Agnes, with great state. 'The fever is gone, and I hope she will soon be well.'

'Poor little Emmy,' said Oswald; 'but I don't want her to be well too soon—that is, it would not do to hurry her recovery. She must want a great deal of care still.'

He hoped she would smile at this, or else take it literally and reply seriously; but Agnes did neither. She walked on, with a stately air, quickening her pace slightly, but not so as to look as if she were trying to escape.

'I suppose, as the fever is gone, she has ceased to imagine

herself in heaven,' said Oswald. 'Happy child! when sickness has such illusions, it is a pity to be well. We are not so well off in our commonplace life.'

He thought she would have responded to the temptation and turned upon him to ask what he meant by calling life commonplace; and indeed the wish stirred Agnes so that she had to quicken her pace in order to resist the bait thus offered. She said nothing, however, to Oswald's great discomfiture, who felt that nothing was so bad as silence, and did not know how to overcome the blank, which had more effect on his lively temperament than any amount of disapproval and opposition. But he made another valorous effort before he would complain.

'Yours, however, is not a commonplace life,' he said. 'We worldlings pay for our ease by the sense that we are living more or less ignobly, but it must be very different with you who are doing good always. Only, forgive me, is there not a want of a little pleasure, a little colour, a little brightness? The world is so beautiful,' said Oswald, his voice slightly faltering, not so much from feeling, as from fear that he might be venturing on dubious ground. 'And *we* are so young.'

That pronoun, so softly said, with such a tender emphasis and meaning, so much more than was ever put into two letters before, went to the heart of Agnes. She was trying so hard to be angry with him, trying to shut herself against the insinuating tone of his voice, and those attempts to beguile her into conversation. All the theoretical fervour that was in her mind had been boiling up to reply, and perhaps her resolution would not have been strong enough to restrain her, had not that *we* come in, taking the words from her lips and the strength from her mind. She could neither protest against the wickedness and weakness of consenting to live an ignoble life, nor indignantly declare that there was already more than pleasure, happiness, and delight in the path of self-sacrifice, when all the force was stolen out of her by that tiny monosyllable—*we*! How dared he identify himself with her? draw her into union with him by that little melting yet binding word? She went on faster than ever in the agitation of her thoughts, and was scarcely conscious that she made him no answer; though surely what he had said called for some reply.

Oswald was at his wit's end. He did not know what to

say more. He made a little pause for some answer, and then getting none, suddenly changed his tone into one of pathetic appeal. 'Are you angry with me?' he said. 'What have I done? Don't you mean to speak to me any more?'

'Yes,' she said, turning suddenly round, so that he could not tell which of his questions she was answering. 'I am vexed that you will come with me. Gentlemen do not insist on walking with ladies to whom they have not been introduced—whom they have met only by chance——'

He stopped short suddenly, moved by the accusation; but unfortunately Agnes too, startled by his start, stopped also, and gave him a curious, half-defiant, half-appealing look, as if asking what he was going to do; and this look took away all the irritation which her words had produced. He proceeded to excuse himself, walking on, but at a slower pace, compelling her to wait for him—for it did not occur to Agnes, though she had protested against his company, to take the remedy into her own hands, and be so rude as to break away.

'What could I do?' he said piteously. 'You would not tell me even your name—you know mine. I don't know how to address you, nor how to seek acquaintance in all the proper forms. It is no fault of mine.'

This confused Agnes by a dialectic artifice for which she was not prepared. He gave a very plausible reason, not for the direct accusation against him, but for a lesser collateral fault. She had to pause for a moment before she could see her way out of the maze. 'I did not mean that. I meant you should not come at all,' she said.

'Ah! you cannot surely be so hard upon me,' cried Oswald, in real terror, for it had not occurred to him that she would, in cold blood, send him away. 'Don't banish me!' he cried. 'Tell me what I am to do for the introduction—where am I to go? I will do anything. Is it my fault that I did not know you till that day?—till that good child, bless her, broke her leg. I shall always be grateful to poor little Emmy. She shall have a crutch of gold if she likes. She shall never want anything I can give her. Do you think I don't feel the want of that formula of an introduction? With that I should be happy. I should be able to see you at other times than hospital days, in other places than the streets. The streets are beautiful ever since I knew you,' cried the young man, warming with his own words, which made him

feel the whole situation much more forcibly than before, and moved him at least, whether they moved her or not.

'Oh!' cried Agnes, in distress, 'you must not talk to me so. You must not come with me, Mr. Meredith; is not my dress enough——'

'There now!' he said, 'see what a disadvantage I am under. I dare not call you Agnes, which is the only sweet name I know. And your dress! You told me yourself you were not a Sister.'

'It is quite true,' she said, looking at him, trying another experiment. 'I am a poor teacher, quite out of your sphere.'

'But then, fortunately, I am not poor,' said Oswald, almost gaily, in sudden triumph. 'Only tell me where your people are, where I am to go for that introduction. I thank thee, Lady Agnes, Princess Agnes, for teaching me that word. I will get my introduction or die.'

'Oh, here we are at the House!' she cried suddenly, in a low tone of horror, and darted away from him up the steps to the open door. Sister Mary Jane was standing there unsuspecting, but visibly surprised. She had just parted with someone, whom poor Agnes, in her terror, ran against; for in the warmth of the discussion they had come up to the very gate of the House, the entrance to that sanctuary where lovers were unknown. Sister Mary Jane opened a pair of large blue eyes, which Oswald (being full of admiration for all things that were admirable) had already noted, and gazed at him, bewildered, letting Agnes pass without comment. He took off his hat with his most winning look of admiring respectfulness as he went on—no harm in winning over Sister Mary Jane, who was a fair and comely Sister, though though no longer young. Would Agnes, he wondered, have the worldly wisdom to make out that he was an old acquaintance, or would she confess the truth? Would Sister Mary Jane prove a dragon, or, softened by her own beauty and the recollection of past homages, excuse the culprit? Oswald knew very well that anyhow, while he walked off unblamed and unblamable, the girl who had been only passive, and guilty of no more than the mildest indiscretion, would have to suffer more or less. This, however, did not move him to any regret for having compromised her. It rather amused him, and seemed to give him a hold over her. She could not take such high ground now and order him away. She was

in the same boat, so to speak. Next time they met she would have something to tell which he would almost have a right to know. It was the establishing of confidence between them. Oswald did not reckon at a very serious rate the suffering that might arise from Sister Mary Jane's rebuke. 'They have no thumbscrews in those new convents, and they don't build girls up in holes in the walls now-a-days,' he said to himself, and, on the whole, the incident was less likely to end in harm than in good.

Agnes did not think so, who rushed in—not to her room, which would have been a little comfort, but to the curtained corner of the dormitory, from which she superintended night and day 'the middle girls,' who were her charge, and where she was always afraid of some small pair of peeping eyes prying upon her seclusion. She threw off her bonnet, and flung herself on her knees by the side of her little bed. 'Oh, what a farce it was,' she thought, to cover such feelings as surged in her heart under the demure drapery of that black cloak, or to tie the conventual bonnet over cheeks that burned with blushes, called there by such words as she had been hearing! She bent down her face upon the coverlet and cried as if her heart would break, praying for forgiveness, though these same foolish words would run in and out of her prayers, mixing with her heart-broken expressions of penitence in the most bewildering medley. After all, there was no such dreadful harm done. She was not a Sister, nor had she ever intended to be a Sister, but that very simple reflection afforded the fanciful girl no comfort. She had come here to seek a higher life, and lo, at once, at the first temptation, had fallen—fallen, into what? Into the foolishness of the foolishlest girl without an ideal—she whose whole soul had longed to lay hold on the ideal, to get into some higher atmosphere, on some loftier level of existence. It was not Sister Mary Jane she was afraid of, it was herself whom she had so offended; for already, could it be possible? insidious traitors in her heart had begun to ply her with suggestions of other kinds of perfection; wicked lines of poetry stole into her head, foolish stories came to her recollection. Oh! even praying, even penitence were not enough to keep out this strife. She sprang to her feet, and rushed to St. Cecilia, the room which was her battleground, and where the noise of the girls putting away their books and work, and preparing to go to tea, promised

her exemption, for a little while at least, from any possibility of thought. But Agnes was not to be let off so easily. In the passage she met Sister Mary Jane. 'I was just going to send for you,' said the Sister, benign but serious. 'Come to my room, Agnes. Sister Sarah Ann will take the children to tea.'

Agnes followed, with her heart, she thought, standing still. But it would be a relief to be scolded, to be delivered from the demon of self-reproach in her own bosom. Sister Mary Jane seated herself at a table covered with school-books and account-books, in the little bare room, laid with matting, which was all the House afforded for the comfort of its rulers. She pointed to a low seat which all the elder girls knew well, which was the stool of repentance for the community. 'My dear,' said Sister Mary Jane, 'did you know that gentleman in the world? Tell me truly, Agnes. You are only an associate: you are not under our rule, and there is no harm in speaking to an acquaintance. But so long as anyone wears our dress there must be a certain amount of care. Did you know him, my dear, tell me, in the world?'

Agnes could not meet these serious eyes. Her head drooped upon her breast. She began to cry. 'I do not think it was my fault. Oh, I have been wrong, but I did not mean it. It was not my fault.'

'That is not an answer, my dear,' said Sister Mary Jane.

And then the whole story came rushing forth with sobes and excuses and self-accusations all in one. 'It is the badness in my heart. I want to be above the world, but I cannot. Things come into my mind that I don't want to think. I would rather, far rather, be devoted to my work, and think of nothing else, like you, Sister Mary Jane. And then I get tempted to talk, to give my opinion. I was always fond of conversation. Tell me what to do to keep my course straight, to be like you. Oh, if I could keep steady and think only of one thing! It is my thoughts that run off in every direction: it is not this gentleman. Oh, what can one do when one's heart is so wrong!'

Sister Mary Jane listened with a smile. Oswald's confidence in her beautiful eyes was perhaps not misplaced. And probably she was conscious now and then of thinking of something else as much as her penitent. She said, 'My dear, I don't think you have a vocation. I never thought it. A girl

may be a very good girl and not have a vocation. So you need not be very unhappy if your thoughts wander; all of us have not the same gifts. But, Agnes, even if you were in the world, instead of being in this house, which should make you more careful, you would not let a gentleman talk to you whom you did not know. You must not do it again.'

'It was not meant badly,' said Agnes, veering to self-defence. 'He wanted to know how little Emmy was. It was the gentleman who carried her to the hospital. It was kindness; it was not meant for——'

'Yes, I saw who it was. And I can understand how it came about. But it is so easy to let an acquaintance spring up, and so difficult to end it when it has taken root. Perhaps, my dear, you had better not go to little Emmy again.'

'Oh!' Agnes gave a cry of remonstrance and protest. It did not hurt her to be told not to speak to him any more—but not to go to little Emmy! She was not sure herself that it was all for little Emmy's sake, and this made her still more unhappy, but not willing to relinquish the expedition. Sister Mary Jane, however, took no notice of the cry. She put a heap of exercises into Agnes's hands to be corrected. 'They must all be done to-night,' she said, calculating with benevolent severity that this would occupy all the available time till bedtime. 'One nail drives out another,' she said to herself, being an accomplished person, with strange tongues at her command. And thus she sent the culprit away, exhausted with tears and supplied with work. 'It will send you some tea to St. Monica, where you can be quiet,' she said. And there Agnes toiled all the evening over her exercises, and had not a moment to spare. 'Occupation, occupation,' said the Sister to herself; 'that is the only thing. She will do very well if she has no time to think.'

But was that the ideal life? I doubt if Sister Mary Jane thought so; but she was old enough to understand the need of such props, which Agnes was still young enough to have indignantly repudiated. For her part, Agnes felt that a little more thought would save her. If she could get vain imaginations out of her head, and those scraps of poetry, and bits of foolish novels, and replace them with real thought—thought upon serious subjects, something worthy the name—how soon would all those confusing, tantalising shadows flee away! But, in the meantime, it is undeniable that the girl left this inter-

view with a sense of relief, such as it is to be supposed, is one of the chief reasons why confession continues to hold its place, named or nameless, in all religious communions more or less. Sister Mary Jane was not the spiritual director of the community, though I think the place would have very well become her; but it was undeniable that the mind of Agnes was lightened after she had poured forth her burdens; also that her sin did not look quite so heinous as it had done before; also that the despair which had enveloped her, and of which the consciousness that she must never so sin again formed no inconsiderable part, was imperceptibly dispelled, and the future as well as the past made less gloomy. Perhaps, if any very searching inspection had been made into those recesses of her soul which were but imperfectly known to Agnes herself, it might have been read there that there was no longer any crushing weight of certainty as to the absolute cessation of the sin; but that was beyond the reach of investigation. Anyhow, she had no time to think any more. Never had exercises so bad come under the young teacher's inspection; her brain reeled over the mis-spellings, the misunderstandings. Healthy human ignorance, indifference, opacity, desire to get done anyhow, could not have shown to greater advantage. They entirely carried out the intentions of Sister Mary Jane, and left her not a moment for thought, until she got to her recess in the dormitory. And then, after the whisperings were all hushed, and the lights extinguished, Agnes was too tired for anything but sleep—a result of occupation which the wise Sister was well aware of too. Indeed, everything turned out so well in the case of this young penitent, that Sister Mary Jane deemed it advisable not to interfere with the visits to the hospital. If she surmounted temptation, why, then she was safe; if not, other steps must be taken. Anyhow, it was well that her highly-wrought feelings and desire of excellence should be put to the test; and as Agnes was not even a Postulant, but still in 'the world,' an unwise backsliding of this kind was less important. No real harm could come to her. Nevertheless, Sister Mary Jane watched her slim figure disappear along the street from her window with unusual interest. Was it mere interest in little Emmy that had made the girl so anxious to go, or was she eager to encounter the test and try her own strength? Or was there still another reason, a wish more weak, more human, more

girlish? Agnes walked on very quickly, pleased to find herself at liberty. She was proud of the little patient, whose small face brightened with delight at the sight of her. And she did not like the sensation of being shut up out of danger, and saved arbitrarily from temptation. Her heart rose with determination to keep her own pure ideal path, whatever solicitations or blandishments might assail her. And indeed, to Agnes, as to a knight of romance, it is not to be denied that 'the danger's self was lure alone.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIRESIDE.

It is very hard to be obliged to alter our relationships with our friends, and still more hard to alter the habits which have shaped our lives. Mr. Beresford, when he was forbidden to continue his visits to his neighbour, was like a man stranded, not knowing what to make of himself. When the evening came he went to his library as usual, and made an attempt to settle to his work, as he called it. But long before the hour at which with placid regularity he had been used to go to Mrs. Meredith's he got uneasy. Knowing that his happy habit was to be disturbed, he was restless and uncomfortable even before the habitual moment came. He could not read, he could not write—how was he to spend the slowing-moving moments, and how to account to her for the disturbance of the usual routine? Should he write and tell her that he was going out, that he had received a sudden invitation or a sudden commission. When he was debating this question in his mind, Edward came in with a very grave face to say that his mother was ill and unable to see anyone.

'She said you had better be told,' said Edward; 'she has gone to her room. She has a—headache. She cannot see anyone to-night.'

'Mr. Sommerville has been with you; has he anything to do with your mother's headache?'

'I think so,' said Edward, angrily—'old meddler; but she seems to think we must put up with him. I wish my father would come home and look after his own affairs.'

‘It was a mission from your father, then?’ Mr. Beresford was silent for a moment, thinking with somewhat sombre dissatisfaction of the absent Meredith. Would it be so pleasant to see him come home? Would the unaccustomed presence of the master be an advantage to the house? He could not be so insincere as to echo Edward’s wish; but he was moved sympathetically towards the youth, who certainly was quite unsuspicious of him, whatever other people might be. ‘Go upstairs and see Cara,’ he said; ‘she is in the drawing-room.’

The young man’s face brightened. Oswald was absent; he was not as usual in his brother’s way; and though Edward had agreed loyally to accept what he supposed to be the state of affairs and school himself to look upon Cara as his future sister, that was no reason—indeed it was rather the reverse of a reason—for avoiding her now. He went upstairs with a kind of sweet unhappiness in his heart. If Cara was not for him, he must put up with it; he must try to be glad if she had chosen according to her own happiness. But in the meantime he would try to forget that, and take what pleasure heaven might afford him in her society—a modified imperfect happiness with an after-taste of bitterness in it—but still better than no consolation at all.

Cara was with her aunt in the drawing-room, and they both welcomed him with smiles. Miss Cherry, indeed, was quite effusive in her pleasure.

‘Come and tell us all the news and amuse us,’ she said; ‘that is the chief advantage of having men about. My brother is no good, he never goes out; and if he did go out, he never comes upstairs. I thought Oswald would have come this evening,’ Miss Cherry said, in a tone which for her sounded querulous; and she looked from one to the other of the young people with a curious look. She was not pleased to be left out of Cara’s confidence, and when they excused Oswald with one breath, both explaining eagerly that they had known of his engagement, Miss Cherry was if anything worse offended still. Why should not they be open, and tell everything? she thought.

‘Besides,’ said Cara, very calmly, ‘Oswald never comes here in the evening: he has always so many places to go to, and his club. Edward is too young to have a club. Why should people go out always at night? Isn’t it pleasant to stay at home?’

'My dear, gentlemen are not like us,' said Miss Cherry, instinctively defending the absent, 'and to tell the truth, when I have been going to the play, or to a party—I mean in my young days—I used to like to see the lighted streets—all the shops shining, and the people thronging past on the pavement. I am afraid it was a vulgar taste; but I liked it. And men, who can go where they please—— I am very sorry that your mamma has a headache, Edward. She is not seeing anyone? I wonder what James——?' Here she stopped abruptly and looked conscious, feeling that to discuss her brother with these young persons would be very foolish. Fortunately they were occupied with each other, and did not pay much attention to what she said.

'Oh, Edward,' said Cara, 'stay and read to us! There is nothing I like so much. It is always dull here in the evenings, much duller than at the Hill, except when we go out. And Aunt Cherry has her work, and so have I. Sit here—here is a comfortable chair close to the lamp. You have nothing particular to do, and if your mother has a headache, she does not want you.'

'I don't require to be coaxed,' said Edward, his face glowing with pleasure; and then a certain pallor stole over it as he said to himself, she is treating me like her brother; but even that was pleasant, after a sort. 'I am quite willing to read,' he said; 'what shall it be? Tell me what book you like best.'

'Poetry,' said Cara; 'don't you like poetry, Aunt Cherry? There is a novel there; but I prefer Tennyson. Mr. Browning is a little too hard for me. Aunt Cherry, Edward is very good when he reads out loud. You would like to hear "Elaine"?'

'Ye-es,' said Miss Cherry. She cast a regretful glance at the novel, which was fresh from Mudie's; but soon cheered up, reflecting that she was half through the second volume, and that it would not be amusing to begin it over again. 'In my young days stories would bear reading two or three times over,' she said, unconsciously following out her own thought; 'but they have fallen off like everything else. Yes, my dear, I am always fond of poetry. Let me get my work. It is the new kind of art-needlework, Edward. I don't know if you have seen any of it. It is considered a great deal better in design than the Berlin work we used to do, and it is a very

easy stitch, and goes quickly. That is what I like in it. I must have the basket with all my crewels, Cara, and my scissors and my thimble, before he begins. I hate interrupting anyone who is reading. But you are only hemming, my dear. You might have prettier work for the drawing-room. I think girls should always have some pretty work in hand; don't you think so, Edward? It is pleasanter to look at than that plain piece of white work.'

'I should think anything that Cara worked at pretty,' said Edward, forgetting precaution. Miss Cherry looked up at him suddenly with a little alarm, but Cara, who was searching for the crewels, and the thimble and the scissors, on a distant table, fortunately did not hear what he said.

'H-hush!' said Miss Cherry; 'we must not make the child vain;' but, to tell the truth, her lively imagination immediately leaped at a rivalry between the brothers. 'I suppose we must consider her fate sealed, though she is not so frank about it as I could wish,' she added, in an under-tone.

'Here are your crewels, Aunt Cherry; and here is the book, Edward. What were you talking about?' said Cara, coming back into the warm circle of the light.

'Nothing, my darling—about the art-needlework, and Edward thinks it very pretty; but I am not sure that I don't prefer the Berlin wool. After all, to work borders to dusters seems scarcely worth while, does it? Oh yes, my dear, I know, it is for a chair; but it looks just like a duster. Now we used to work on silk and satin—much better worth it.'

'Aunt Cherry, you always talk most when someone is beginning to read.'

'Do I, dear?' said Miss Cherry, in a wondering, injured tone. 'Well, then, I shall be silent. I do not think I am much given to be talkative. Have I got everything?—then, my dear boy, please go on.'

It was a pretty scene. The rich warm centre of the fire, the moon-lamps on either table, filled the soft atmosphere with light. Miss Cherry, in her grey gown, which was of glistening silk, full of soft reflections, in the evening, sat on one side, with her crewels in her lap, giving points of subdued colour, and her face full in the light, very intent over the work, which sometimes puzzled her a little. Cara and Edward had the other table between them; he with his book before him, placed so that he could see her when he raised his

eyes; she with the muslin she was hemming falling about her pretty hands—a fair white creature, with a rose-light shed upon her from the fire. The rest of the room was less light, enshrining this spot of brightness, but giving forth chance gleams in every corner from mirrors which threw them forth dimly, from china and old Venetian glass, which caught the light, and sent flickers of colour about the walls. Mr. Beresford, who, deprived of his usual rest, was wandering about, an *âme en peine*, looked in for a moment at the door, and paused to look at them, and then disappeared again. He never spent a moment longer than he could help in that haunted room; but to-night, perhaps, in his restlessness, might have found it a relief to take his natural place there, had he not been checked by the quiet home-like aspect of this pretty group, which seemed complete. It did not look like any chance combination, but seemed so harmonious, so natural to the place, as if it had always been there, and always must possess the warm fireside, that he was incapable of disturbing them. Better to bear the new life alone. This genial party—what had he to do with it, disturbing it by his past, by the ghosts that would come with him? He shut the door noiselessly, and went back again, down to his gloomy library. Poor Annie's room, in which everything spoke of her—how the loss of her had changed all the world to him, and driven him away for ever from the soft delight of that household centre! Strangely enough, the failure of the refuge which friendship had made for him, renewed all his regrets tenfold for his wife whom he had lost. He seemed almost to lose her again, and the bitterness of the first hours came back upon him as he sat alone, having nowhere to go to. Life was hard on him, and fate.

The party in the drawing-room had not perceived this ghost looking in upon them: they went on tranquilly; Miss Cherry puckering her soft old forehead over her art design, and the firelight throwing its warm ruddiness over Cara's white dress. Barring the troubles incident upon art-needlework, the two ladies were giving their whole minds to the lily maid of Astolat and her love-tragedy. But the reader was not so much absorbed in 'Elaine.' Another current of thought kept flowing through his mind underneath the poetry. He wondered whether this would be his lot through his life, to sit in the light of the warmth which was for his brother, and be the

tame spectator of the love which was his brother's, and make up for the absence of the gay truant who even for that love's sake would not give up his own pleasures. Edward felt that there would be a certain happiness touched with bitterness even in his lot; but how strange that this, which he would have given his life for, should fall to Oswald's share, who would give so little for it, and not to him! These thoughts ran through his mind like a cold undercurrent below the warm sunlit surface of the visible stream; but they did not show, and indeed they did not much disturb Edward's happiness of the moment, but gave it a kind of poignant thrill of feeling, which made it more dear. He knew (he thought) that Oswald was the favoured and chosen, but as yet he had not been told of it, and the uncertainty was still sweet, so long as it might last.

'Ah!' said Cara, drawing a long breath: the poetry had got into her head—tears were coming into her eyes, filling them and then ebbing back again somehow, for she would not shed them. She had no thought but for 'Elaine,' yet felt somehow, as youth has a way of doing, a soft comparison between herself and Elaine, a wavering of identity—was it that she too was capable of that 'love of the moth for the star?' Edward watching her, felt that there was more poetry in Cara's blue eyes than in the Laureate; and no shame to Mr. Tennyson. Is it not in that tender emotion, that swelling of the heart to all lofty and sorrowful, and beautiful things, that poetry takes its rise? Cara being truly the poet's vision, even to her own touched and melting consciousness, was all Elaine in her young lover's eyes.

'But, my dear, my dear!' said Miss Cherry, 'if poor Elaine had only loved someone like herself, some young knight that could respond to her and make her happy, oh, how much better it would have been! It makes my heart ache: for Lancelot, you know, never could have loved her; though indeed I don't know why not, for men being middle-aged is no guarantee,' Miss Cherry added, with a little sigh, 'against their making fools of themselves for young girls; but it would have been far more natural and happier for her had she set her heart on someone of her own age, who would have made her ——'

'Oh,' cried Cara, 'don't say it over again! made her happy! did Elaine want to be made happy? She wanted

what was the highest and noblest, not asking what was to become of her. What did it matter about her? It was enough that she found out Lancelot without even knowing his name. I suppose such a thing might be,' said Cara, sinking her voice in poetic awe, 'as that Lancelot might come to one's very door, and one never know him. That would be worse, far worse, than dying for his sake.'

'Oh, Cara, Lancelot was not such a very fine character after all,' said Miss Cherry, 'and though I am not so clever about poetry as you are, I have seen many a young girl taken in with an older man, who seemed everything that was noble, but had a very sad past behind him that nobody knew of; but after they are married, it is always found out. I would rather, far rather, see *you* with a young man of your own age.'

'Aunt Cherry!' cried the girl, blushing all over with the hot, sudden, overwhelming blush of her years, and then Cara threw a glance at Edward, seeking sympathy and implying horror at this matter-of-fact view, and caught his eye and blushed all the more; while Edward blushed too, he knew not why. This glance of mutual understanding silenced them both, though neither knew what electric spark had passed between them. Cara in her confusion edged her chair a little further off, and Edward returned to his book. It was an interruption to the delicious calm of the evening. And Miss Cherry began to look at her watch and wonder audibly to find that it was so late. 'Past ten o'clock! almost time for bed. I thought it was only about eight. Are you really going, Edward? I am sure we are very much obliged—the evening has passed so quickly. And I hope your mamma will be better to-morrow. Tell her how very very sorry we are, and give her my love.'

Edward went away with his heart beating loud. To think that the rightful enjoyment of all this belonged not to himself, but to Oswald, who was out dining, perhaps flirting somewhere, caring so little about it. Was it always so in this world—what a man most wanted he never got, but that which he prized little was flung to him like a crust to a dog? How strange it was! Edward did not go in, but lit a pensive cigar, and paced up and down the Square, watching the lights rise into the higher windows. He knew which was Cara's, and watched the lighting of the candles on the table, which he could guess by the faint brightening which showed outside.

What was she thinking of? Perhaps of Oswald, wondering why he had not come; perhaps kindly of himself as of a brother, in whose affection she would trust. Yes! said Edward to himself, with pathetic enthusiasm; she should always be able to trust in his affection. If Oswald proved but a cool lover, a cooler husband, Edward would never fail her as a brother. She should never find out that any other thought had ever entered his mind. She should learn that he was always at her command, faithful to any wish of hers; but then he recollected, poor fellow, that he was going to India, in Oswald's place, who would not go. How could he serve her—how could he be of use to her then?

Miss Cherry lingered a little after she had sent Cara to bed. She wanted to look over the end of that novel, and the fire was too good to be left, John having imprudently heaped on coals at a late hour. Before she opened the book she paused to think that if it had not been Oswald, she almost wished that it had been Edward; but it was Cara, of course, who must choose. She had not read much more than a page, however, when her studies were disturbed. Her brother came suddenly into the room, in his slippers, a carelessness of toilette which was quite unusual to him. He came in making her start, and poked the fire with a sort of violence without saying anything. Then he turned his back to the mantelpiece, and gave a glance round the room, in all its dim perfections, and sighed.

'Cherry,' he said, 'if you are not busy, I should like to ask you a question. I came upstairs a little while ago, but you were too much occupied to notice me.'

'James! indeed, I never saw you.'

'I know you did not. I did not mean to blame anyone. Tell me what you meant the other morning, when you advised me to stay at home after dinner—not to leave Cara? Was it for Cara's sake?'

'Cara was lonely, James; she has never—been used—to be left alone.'

'Was it for Cara's sake?'

'Oh, James,' said Miss Cherry, faltering, 'don't think I wish to interfere! You are more able to judge than I am. It is not my place to make any remarks upon what you do.'

'Cherry, don't evade the question; why did you speak to me so? Was it entirely for Cara's sake?'

Miss Cherry grew red and grew white. She clasped her hands together in unconscious supplication. 'I must say what I think if I say anything, James. It was a little for—dear Mrs. Meredith too. One must think of her as well. Her husband is a long way off; she is a very kind woman—kindness itself. Even if she thought you came too often, she would not like to say anything. Women understand women, James. She would say to herself, that to send you away would hurt your feelings, and she would rather bear a little annoyance herself.'

'Do you mean to say she has had any annoyance on my account?'

'She might have, James dear. She has not taken me into her confidence; but people talk. I suppose if she was a widow and you could—marry ——'

'Charity!'

He had scarcely ever called her by that formal name before, and Miss Cherry was frightened. 'Oh!' she cried, once more clasping her hands. 'Do not punish me for it! It is not my fault. I know better, for I know you both; but people will say so; and you should deny yourself for her sake.'

'Does *she* wish it?' he said hoarsely. It took him a strenuous effort to keep down his fury; but indeed there was no one to assail.

'She would not wish anything for herself; it would be her nature to think of you first,' said Miss Cherry. 'It is not what she wishes, but what you, me, everybody, ought to wish for her, James.'

He looked round the room with a cloud upon his face. 'Do you know what I see here?' he said;—'my past life, which I cannot recall. Am I to come here disturbing the new life that is beginning in it—filling the place with gloom. That does not matter, does it? Better to think of a few malicious words, and make them the rule of one's conduct, than strive to follow nature and common sense.'

'James!' said Miss Cherry, 'all the malicious words in the world will do no harm to *you*!'

'What do you mean?' he said.

'You are free, so far as that is concerned,' said his timid sister, rising from her seat. She looked at him with a mild contempt, strange to be seen in the eyes of so gentle a woman.

'You can do what you like, James; it is not *you* who will suffer. Good-night,' she said.

And though Miss Cherry's heart beat loudly, she had the courage to go away and leave him there, transfixed with that bold dart thrown by her most timid, faltering hand. He stood still for some time after she had left him, unable to move with pain and astonishment. The ass of Balaam was nothing to this tremendous *coup* from Miss Cherry. He was struck prostrate. Almost he forgot to think of the room and its recollections, so entirely was he slain by this blow.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OLD FOLK AND THE YOUNG.

THE intercourse between the two houses went on for some time in that uncomfortable and embarrassing way which comes between the sudden pause of a domestic crisis and the inevitable but delayed explanation. The evening after that on which Mrs. Meredith had a headache, Mr. Beresford had an engagement. Next night she went to the opera, which had just re-opened; the next again he had a meeting of his Society; and thus they continued, avoiding the meeting at which something would require to be said, and suffering intensely each with a sense of unkindness on the part of the other. James Beresford could not but feel that to cut him off thus, demonstrated a coolness of interest on the part of his friend which went against all those shows of kindness which made her so beloved—those soft ministrations of sympathy which, he supposed bitterly, anybody might have for the asking, but which were withdrawn as easily as they were given; while she, on her part, with a certain wondering resentment, felt his tame withdrawal from her, and uncourageous yielding of her friendship to the first suggestion of conventional fault-finding. But this could not go on for ever between two people of honest feeling. There came a time when he could not bear it, and she could not bear it. Mr. Beresford's return to the house which he had visited daily for so long attracted naturally as much observation as the cessation of his visits had done. While these visits were habitual there might

be private smiles and comments; but the sudden stoppage of them naturally aroused all the dormant criticism; and when, after a ten days' interval, he knocked at Mrs. Meredith's door again, all her servants and his own, and the houses next door on each side, were in a ferment of curiosity. What was going to happen? He walked upstairs into the drawing-room, with his elderly heart beating a little quicker than usual. Hearts of fifty are more apt to palpitate in such cases as this than in any other. James Beresford was not in love with his neighbour's wife, but he had found in her that tender friendship, that healing sympathy which men and women can afford to each other, better, perhaps, than men can to men, or women to women—a friendship which is the most enduring charm of marriage, but not necessarily confined to it; which is the highest delight of fraternal intercourse, yet not always to be found in that. The loss of it without fault on either side makes one of those rents in life which are as bad as death itself, even when accompanied by full understanding, on both sides, of the reason for the separation; and very rarely can these reasons be accepted and acknowledged on both sides alike, without pangs of injury or development of other and less blameless sentiments. Vulgar opinion with one unanimous voice has stigmatised the relationship as impossible; from which it may be conceded that it is dangerous and difficult; but yet solitary examples of it are to be found all over the world; occurring here and there with delicate rarity like a fastidious flower which only some quintessence of soil can suit; and it flourishes most, as is natural, among those to whom the ordinary relationships of life have not been satisfactory. Beresford, bereft half-way on the hard road of existence of his natural companion, and Mrs. Meredith deserted by hers, were, of all people in the world, the two most likely to find some compensation in such a friendship; but I do not say it is a thing to be permitted or encouraged, because here were two for whom it was a kind of secondary happiness. They were as safe from falling into the sin which neither of them were the least inclined to, as if they had been two rocks or towers; but others might not be so safe, and social laws must, so long as the world lasts under its present conditions, be made for vulgar minds. Perhaps, too, Cara would have occupied a different place as her mother's representative had not her father found a confidant and companion of his own age,

who was so much to him; and the boys might have found their mother more exclusively their own, had not so confidential a counsellor been next door. But it is doubtful whether in the latter particular there was anything to be regretted, for boys must go out into the world, according to the same vulgar voice of general opinion, and have nothing to do with their mother's apron-string. Still it was not a thing to be permitted, that those two should be such friends; and now at last the world's will had been fully signified to them; and after an attempt to elude the necessity of explanation, the moment had come at which they must obey the fiat of society, and meet to part.

He walked into the room, his heart thumping with a muffled sound against his bosom—not like the heart-beats of young emotion—heavier, less rapid, painful throbs. She was seated in her usual place by the fire, a little table beside her with a lamp upon it, and some books. She had her knitting in her hand. She did not rise to receive him, but raised her eyes in all the old friendly sweetness, and held out her hand. She was agitated too, but she had more command over herself. There are cases in which a man may, and a woman must not, show emotion.

'Well?' she said, in a voice with a falter in it, taking no notice of his absence, or of any reason why they should not meet. 'Well?' half a question, half a salutation, betraying only in its brevity that she was not sufficiently at her ease for many words.

He went up and stood before her, putting out his hands to the fire with that want of warmth which all unhappy people feel. He could not smile or take no notice as she tried to do. 'I have come to ask you what is the meaning of this?' he said; 'and whether there is no resource. If it must be——'

'The meaning of—what?' she said, faltering; then again a pause: 'I have nothing to do with it, Mr. Beresford; I do not understand it. These people speak a strange language.'

'Don't they?' he cried; 'a vile language, made for other ears than yours. Are we to be ruled by it, you and I, to whom it is a jargon of the lower world?'

She did not make any answer; her fingers trembled over her knitting, but she went on with it. That he should speak so, gave her a little consolation; but she knew very well, as perhaps he also knew, that there was nothing for it but to yield

'What harm can I do you?' he said, with a kind of aimless argument. 'I am not a man to harm people by the mere sight of me, am I? I am not new and untried, like a stranger whom people might be doubtful of. All my antecedents are known. What harm can I do you? or the boys—perhaps they think I will harm the boys.'

'Oh, do not talk so,' she said; 'you know no one thinks of harm in you. It is because everything that is unusual must be wrong; because—but why should we discuss it, when there is no reason in it?'

'Why should we obey it, when there is no reason in it?' he said.

'Alas! we cannot help ourselves now; when a thing is said, it cannot be unsaid. After this we could not be the same. We should remember, and be conscious.'

'Of what?'

'Oh, of—nothing, except what has been said. Don't be angry with me. I have so many things to think of—the boys first of all; there must be no talking for them to hear. Don't you think,' she said, with tears in her eyes, which glistened and betrayed themselves, yet with an appealing smile, 'that least said is soonest mended? To discuss it all is impossible. If you could come—now and then—as other people come.'

Then there was a pause. To come down to the level of other people—to confess that their intercourse must be so restricted—was not that of itself a confession that the intercourse was dangerous, impossible, even wrong? 'Other people!' Mr. Beresford repeated, in a low tone of melancholy mockery, with a resenting smile. If it had come to that, indeed!—and then he stood with his head bent down, holding his hands to the fire. She was silent, too: what could they say to each other? So many times they had sat in this room in tranquil companionship, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, no bond of politeness upon them to do one thing or the other, understanding each other. And now all at once this comradeship, this brotherhood (are all these nouns of alliance masculine?) had to be dropped, and these two friends become as other people. Not a word was said now—that was the tolling of the dead bell.

'I think I shall go away,' he said, after a pause. 'Life has not so much in it now-a-days, that it can have the best half rent off, and yet go on all the same. I think I shall go away'

'Where will you go to?' she asked softly.

'What do I care?' he said, and then there was another long pause.

All this time, on the other side of the wall, by the fire which corresponded like one twin to another with this, Edward was reading to Cara and Miss Cherry. There is no time in his life in which a young man is so utterly domestic, so content with the little circle of the fireside, as when he is in love. All the amusements and excitements of life were as nothing to Edward in comparison with the limited patch of light in which Miss Cherry and her niece did their needlework. He was very unhappy, poor young fellow; but how sweet it was to be so unhappy! He thought of all that Oswald was relinquishing, with a sense of semi-contempt for Oswald. Nothing would he have done against his brother's interests, however his own were involved; but he could not help the rising sense that in this case at least it was he who was worthy rather than his brother. And it was a never-ceasing wonder to him that Cara took it so placidly. Oswald went to her in the morning and held long conversations with her, but in the evening he pursued his ordinary course, and in the present disorganised state of the two houses all the mutual dinners and evening meetings being made an end of, they scarcely saw each other except in the morning. This, however, the girl seemed to accept as the natural course of affairs. She was not gay, for it was not Cara's habit to be gay; but she went seriously about her little world, and smiled upon Edward with absolute composure as if Oswald had no existence. It was a thing which Edward could not understand. He sat at the other side of the table and read to her, whatever she chose to place before him, as long as she chose. He was never weary; but he did not derive much intellectual advantage from what he read. While he was giving forth someone else's sentiments, his own thoughts were running on a lively under-current. Why was Oswald never here? and why did Cara take his absence so quietly? These were the two leading thoughts with which he perplexed himself; and as he never made out any sort of answer to them, the question ran on for ever. That evening on which Mr. Beresford had gone to have his parting interview with Mrs. Meredith, Miss Cherry was more preoccupied than usual. She sighed over her crewels with more heaviness than could be involved in the

mere difficulties of the pattern. To be sure, there was enough in that pattern to have driven any woman out of her senses. And as she puckered her brows over it, Miss Cherry sighed; but this sigh told of a something more heavy which lay upon her mind, the distracted state of which may be best described by the fact that when they were in the middle of their reading, Cara hemming on with a countenance absorbed, Miss Cherry made the communication of which she was full, all at once, without warning, breaking in, in the middle of a sentence, so that Edward's voice mingled with hers for a line or so, before he could stop himself—

‘Your papa is thinking of going away.’

‘What?’ cried Cara and Edward in a breath.

‘Your papa,’ said Miss Cherry, with another great sigh, ‘is thinking of shutting up his house again, and going away.’

‘Aunt Cherry!’ cried Cara, with the colour rushing suddenly to her face as it had a way of doing when she was moved: and she half-turned and cast a glance at Edward of wonder and sudden dismay. As for him, he had not leisure to feel the strange delight of this confidential glance, so entirely struck dumb was he with the appalling news. He grew pale as Cara grew red, and felt as if all the blood was ebbing out of his heart.

‘It is not that we will not be happy—oh! happy beyond measure—to have you again, my darling,’ said Miss Cherry; ‘but I would be false if I did not say what a disappointment it is to think, after all our hopes for my poor James, that he is not able to settle down in his own house. I can’t tell you what a disappointment it is. So far as we are concerned—Aunt Charity and I—it will be new life to us to have you home. But we did not wish to be selfish, to think of our own comfort, and it will be such a shock to dear Aunt Charity. She always said, as you know, Cara, what a comfort it was to think that the only man of the family was at hand, whatever happened. I don’t know how I am to break it to her, and in her weak state of health.’

‘But, Aunt Cherry—what does it mean?—What has made him change?—Are you sure you are not mistaken? Don’t you think you have misunderstood? It does not seem possible. Are you quite, quite certain?’

‘I am not so silly as you think me, my dear,’ said Miss Cherry, half offended. ‘I know the meaning of words.

Yes, there are reasons. He is not so happy as he thought he might be. No, my darling, I don't think you are to blame. He does not blame you; he only says it is not possible. If you could get him to move perhaps to another house—but not here: he could not possibly stay here.'

Now it was Cara's turn to grow pale and Edward's to grow red. She looked at him again with a wondering, questioning glance, but he did not reply.

'I hope it has nothing to do with the folly of any busy-body—making mischief between him and his friends,' Edward said, with indignation. 'Mr. Beresford ought to have some philosophy—he ought not to mind.'

'Ah—he might not mind for himself—but when others are concerned,' said Miss Cherry, mysteriously. 'But so it is, my dear, whether we approve or not. I meant to have gone back to poor dear Aunt Charity, but now I am to stay on to shut up the house and settle everything. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good,' she added, with a smile; 'we shall have you back again, Cara; and that will be like the spring to the flowers. We gave you up without grumbling—but it is not in nature that we should not be glad to have you back.'

This gentle piece of self-congratulation was all, however, that was said. Cara had grown quite still and pale. She turned her eyes to Edward once more, and looked at him with a sort of woeful appeal that made his heart beat. 'This is dreadful news,' he said, with his voice trembling; and then, true to his brotherly generosity, added as steadily as he could, 'It will be dreadful news for poor Oswald.' Cara clasped her hands together in a kind of mute prayer.

'Do you think nothing can be done?' she said.

Now it was Miss Cherry's turn to feel a little, a very little wounded. 'You have soon forgotten your old home,' she said. 'I thought, though you might be sorry, you would be glad too—to get home.'

'It is not that,' said Cara, with tears in her voice. What a break was this of the calm happiness of the evening, the pleasure of being together, the charm of the poetry, all those 'influences of soul and sense' that had been stealing into the girl's innocent soul and transforming her unawares! No doubt she might have outlived it all and learnt to look back upon that first shock with a smile—but nevertheless it was the first shock, and at the moment it was overwhelming.

She looked at Edward again amazed, appealing to him, asking his sympathy; ought he to thrust in Oswald between them once more? Between love and honour the young man did not know what to do or say. His heart was wrung with the thought of parting, but it was not to him the same shock and unforeseen, unbelievable calamity—under which she turned appealing to earth and heaven.

‘And I am going to India,’ he said, with a kind of despairing smile and quivering lips.

The elder pair on the other side of the wall were not moved by these ineffable visionary pangs. They did not stand aghast at the strange thought that their happiness was being interfered with, that heaven and earth had ceased to favour them—nor did they think that everything was over and life must come to a standstill. Their feelings were less full of the rapture of anguish; yet perhaps the heavy oppression of pain that troubled them was more bitter in its way. They knew very well that life would go on just as before, and nothing dreadful happen. They would only miss each other—miss the kind look and kind word, and simple daily consolation and quiet confidence each in the other. Nobody else could give them that rest and mutual support which they were thus forced to give up without cause. It was a trouble much less to be understood by the common eye, and appealing a great deal less to the heart than those pangs of youth which we have all felt more or less, and can all sympathise with—but it was not a less real trouble. After the interval of silence which neither of them broke, because neither of them had anything to say, James Beresford sank upon his knees and took her hands into his—not in any attitude of sentimental devotion, but only to approach her as she sat there. They looked at each other through tears which to each half blurred the kind countenance which was the friendliest on earth. Then he kissed the hands he held one after the other. ‘God bless you,’ she sobbed, her tears falling upon his sleeve. Why was it? Why was it? yet it had to be. And then they parted; he going back to his gloomy library, she sitting still where he had left her in her lonely drawing-room, wiping away the tears, few but bitter, which this unlooked-for parting had brought to her eyes. They would not complain nor resist—nor even say what the separation cost them—but the young ones would cry out to heaven

and earth, sure at least of pity, and perhaps of succour. That made all the difference. While her father came in with his latch-key, and shut his door, shutting himself up with his thoughts, Cara was lifting the mute anguish of her sweet eyes to Edward, disturbing his very soul, poor fellow, with the question, whether it was only his sympathy she asked as a spectator of her misery in parting with his brother, whether it was — When he said that about going to India, with that tremulous smile and attempt to mock at his own pain, the tears fell suddenly in a little shower, and a sob came from Cara's oppressed bosom. For whom? Such distracting tumults of excitement do not rise in the maturer being—he was almost out of himself with wonder and anxiety, and hope and dread, dismay and terror. Was it for Oswald? Was it only his sympathy she asked for—was it but a pang of sisterly pity intensified by her own suffering, that she gave to him?

The same roof, divided only by a partition, stretched over all those agitated souls, old and young. The only quite light heart it covered was that of Oswald, who came in rather late from a merry party, and lingered still later, smoking his cigar, and thinking what was the next step to be taken in his pursuit of that pretty frightened Agnes, who was no doubt suffering for his sake. It did not hurt Oswald to think that she was suffering for him—rather it brought a smile on his face, and a pleasurable sensation. He had got a hold on her which nothing else could have given him. When they met again he would have a right to inquire into it, to give her his tender sympathy. After all, a scolding from Sister Mary Jane was not very tragical suffering. On the score of that it might be permitted to him to say a great many things that otherwise he could not have said, to suggest conclusions more momentous. And he did not think Agnes would be hard to move. He believed that she would pardon him, and not take away her favour from him—rather perhaps, even in her own despite, look upon him with eyes more kind. Oswald smoked at least two cigars in her honour, wondering if perhaps she was crying over the catastrophe of the evening, and feeling assured that there would be sweetness in her tears. He was apt to be very sure of the favour of all he cared to please, and that everything would go well with him. And as for the troubles that were under the same roof with him, he knew nothing of them, and would not have thought much had he known. He

would have laughed—for of course each of these commotions had its ludicrous side, and Oswald would have made fun of them quite successfully. But they were much less important anyhow than his own preoccupations—full of which, with confidence in his heart, and a smile on his lips, he went cheerfully upstairs, past the door within which his mother lay awake in the dark, thinking over all her life, which had not been, in external circumstances, a very bright one; and that which was closed upon Edward's conflict and confusion. Neither conflict nor confusion was in the mind of Oswald as he went smiling upstairs with his candle. All was likely to turn out well for him at least, whatever might happen to the rest of the world.

CHAPTER XXX.

A REBELLIOUS HEART.

CARA was busy in the drawing-room next morning, arranging a basketful of spring flowers which had come from the Hill, when Oswald came in with his usual budget. He was light-hearted, she was very sad. Oswald was gay because of the triumph he foresaw, and Cara was doubly depressed because she felt that her depression was ungrateful to the kind aunts whom she had been so sorry to leave, though she was so unwilling to go back. Why was it that the thought of going home made her so miserable? she asked herself. Miss Cherry's delusion about Oswald, which had almost imposed upon Cara herself, had floated all away from her mind, half in laughter half in shame, when she found out that Oswald's object was to make her the confidant of his love for another girl, not to make love to her in her own person. Cara had been ashamed of the fancy which her aunt's suggestion had put into her mind, but the *désillusion* had been a relief—and a more sympathetic confidant could not have been. She was interested in every step of the nascent romance, eager to hear all about the romantic intercourse, consisting chiefly of looks and distant salutations, which he confided to her. No suspicion that she knew who his Agnes was had crossed Cara's mind, for Agnes Burchell was just so much older than herself as to have removed her above the terms of intimacy which are so readily

formed between country neighbours. It was Liddy, the third girl of the family, who was Cara's contemporary, and it was to Miss Cherry that Agnes talked when she went to the Hill. But Cara was less interested than usual to-day; her mind was occupied with her own affairs, and that future which seemed, for the moment, so dim and deprived of all the light and brightness of life. When Oswald took the basket of crocuses out of her hand, and bid her to sit down and listen to him, she complied languidly, without any of the bright curiosity and interest which were so pleasant to him. At first, however, occupied by his own tale, he did not even notice this failure. He told her of all that had happened, of the sudden apparition of Sister Mary Jane, and the fright in which his companion had left him. Oswald told the story with a smile. It amused him as if it had happened, Cara said to herself, being in a state of mind to judge more harshly than usual, to someone else.

'But it would not be pleasant for her,' said Cara. 'I don't think she would laugh, Oswald. Even if there was nothing wrong in talking to you, she would feel as if there was when she saw the Sister. Do you think it is—quite—nice? That is a stupid word, I know, but it is the one that comes easiest; quite—quite—kind——?'

'To what, Cara?'

'Get a girl into trouble like that, and walk away and smile? indeed, I don't think it is. They could not say anything to you, but they might say a great many things that would not be pleasant to her—they would say it was not—nice: they would say it was not like a lady: they would say—Oh,' said Cara, with great gravity, 'there are a great many very disagreeable things that people can say.'

'You look as if you had felt it,' said Oswald, with a laugh—'but what does it all mean? Only that the old people cannot amuse themselves as we do—and are jealous. You may be a little tender-conscienced creature, but you don't suppose really that girls mind?'

'Not mind!' cried Cara, growing red, 'to be called un-womanly, unladylike! What should one mind, then? Do you think nothing but beating us should move us? Most likely she has not slept all night for shame—and you, you are quite pleased! you laugh.'

'Come, Cara, you are too hard upon me. Poor little

darling! I would save her if I could from ever shedding a tear. But what does a scolding of that kind matter? She will cry I daresay—and next time we meet she will tell me about it, and laugh at herself for having cried. But I must find out who she is, and get introduced in proper form.'

'Could I go, or Aunt Cherry? I am not hard, Oswald—I would do anything for you or for her—but you should not be so unfeeling. If she is only a teacher and poor, she might get into disgrace, she might be turned away—for, after all,' said Cara, with gentle severity, 'I do not suppose she was to blame—but girls should not talk to gentlemen in the streets. Oh, yes, I know it was your fault—but, after all——'

'What a little dragon!' cried Oswald. 'You! why, I should have thought you would have sympathised with a girl like yourself—that is what comes of being brought up by old maids.'

Cara gave him a look of superb yet gentle disdain. She rose up and got her flowers again, and began to arrange the golden crocus-cups among the moss which she had prepared to receive them. She had nothing to reply to such an accusation—and, to tell the truth, Oswald felt, notwithstanding his fine manly conscious superiority to old maids and prudish girls, and all the rules of old-fashioned decorum, somewhat sharply pricked by the dart of that quiet contempt.

'I recant,' he said. 'Miss Cherry would be less hard than you, my lady Cara.'

'Aunt Cherry would go if you wished it, and tell the Sister not to be angry,' said Cara. 'So would I—though perhaps I am too young. We could say that it was entirely your fault—that you *would* talk to her—that you wish to know her friends.'

'Oh, thanks, I can manage all that myself,' he said, with a mixture of amusement and irritation. 'Remember, I talk to you in confidence, Cara. I don't want my private affairs to travel to Miss Cherry's ears, and to be the talk of all the old ladies. Well, then, I beg your pardon, I will say I am fond of old ladies if you like; but I think we can manage for ourselves without help. She is a darling, Cara—her pretty eyes light up when she says anything, and she will not stand the conventional things that everybody says any more than you will. I am lucky to have got two such clever girls—one for my friend, the other——'

‘Oswald, it is so difficult to know when you are in earnest and when you are making fun. I do not feel so sure of you as I used to do. Are you only making fun of her, or are you really, truly in earnest?’

‘Making fun of her! did not I tell you she had made me serious, pious even? You are a little infidel. But, Cara, look here, I am not joking now. You don’t think very much of me, I know; but there is no joke in this; I am going now to try to find out who she is, and all about her, and then I shall make my mother go, or someone. I did not mean any harm in laughing. Nobody thinks seriously of such affairs; and don’t you see we have a secret between us now, we have a link—we are not like strangers. But, as for being serious—if she is not my wife in three months——?’

‘In three months!’ cried Cara, astounded by his boldness.

‘In less than that. She likes me, Cara. I can see it in her pretty eyes, though she will never look at me if she can help it. You are a horrid little cold-hearted wretch and mock me, but most people do like me,’ said the young man with a laugh of happy vanity in which just enough half-modesty was mingled to make it inoffensive; ‘everybody I may say but you. Oh, I am serious; serious as a judge. In three months; but for heaven’s sake not a word about it, not a syllable to my mother, or anyone!’

‘I am not a telltale,’ said Cara; ‘and I am very glad to see that you can be serious sometimes,’ she added with a sigh.

He looked up alarmed. The first idea, indeed, that crossed Oswald’s mind was that Cara, though she had borne it so well, was now giving in a little, and feeling the bitterness of losing *him*; which was an idea slightly embarrassing but agreeable, for it did not occur to him in the first place as it might to some men that such an occurrence would be humbling and painful to Cara if pleasant and flattering to himself. ‘What is the matter?’ he asked, looking at her curiously. ‘You are not so cheerful as usual.’

‘Oh, Oswald!’ she said, with the tears coming to her eyes. ‘Papa is going away again! I don’t know why. I don’t even know where he is going. It appears that he cannot make himself comfortable at home as he once thought, and the house is to be shut up, and I am going back to the Hill with Aunt Cherry. It is ungrateful—horribly ungrateful of me to

be sorry—but I am, I cannot help it. I thought that papa would have settled and stayed at home, and now all that is over.’

‘Ah!’ said Oswald. ‘So! I did not think it would be so serious; it is about my mother, I suppose.’

‘About your mother!’

‘Yes. People have interfered; they say he is not to come to see her every day as he has been in the habit of doing. It is supposed not to be liked by the governor out in India. It is all the absurdest nonsense. The governor out in India is as indifferent as I am, Cara—you may take my word for that—and only a set of busybodies are to blame. But I am very sorry if it is going to bother you.’

Cara did not make any answer. A flush of visionary shame came over her face. What did it mean? Such questions pain the delicate half-consciousness of a girl that there are matters in the world not fit for her discussion, beyond anything that elder minds can conceive. The suggestion of these hurts her, as elder and stouter fibres are incapable of being hurt, and this all the more when the parties involved are any way connected with herself. That there could be any question of the nature of her father’s regard for any woman, much less for Mrs. Meredith, a woman whom she knew and loved, cut Cara like a knife. Her very soul shrank within her. She changed the subject eagerly—

‘Were you ever at the Hill, Oswald? You must come. It will soon be spring now! look at the crocuses! and in the primrose time the woods are lovely. I was almost brought up there, and I always think of it as home.’

‘But I must ask some more about this—about your father. It ought to be put a stop to—’

‘Oh, don’t say any more,’ cried Cara, hurriedly, with another blush. ‘You must let me know how your own affairs go on, and what happens; and, Oswald, oh! I hope you will take care and not let *her* get into trouble about you. If she was to lose her home and her comfort or even to get scolded—’

‘Getting scolded is not such a dreadful punishment, Cara.’

‘But it is to a girl,’ said Cara, very gravely, and she became so absorbed in the arrangement of her crocuses, setting them in the green moss, which had packed them, that he yielded to her preoccupation, being one of the persons who cannot be content without the entire attention of anyone to

whom they address themselves. He did not make out how it was that he had failed with Cara on this special morning, but he felt the failure, and it annoyed him. For the first time he had lost her interest. Was it that she did not like his devotion to Agnes to go so far, that she felt the disadvantage of losing him? This idea excited and exhilarated Oswald, who liked to be first with everybody. Poor Cara, if it was so! he was very sorry for her. If she had shown any inclination to accept him, he would have been very willing to prove to her that he had not given her up, notwithstanding his love for the other; but she would not pay any attention to his overtures, and nothing was left for him but to go away.

Cara's whole frame seemed to tingle with her blushing, her fancy fled from the subject thrust upon her attention even when excitement brought her back to it and whispered it again in her ears. Her father! Never since the scene which she had witnessed in her mother's sick room, had Cara felt a child's happy confidence in her father. She had never analysed her sentiments towards him, but there had been a half-conscious shrinking, a sense as of something unexplained that lay between them. She had gone over that scene a hundred times and a hundred to that, roused to its importance only after it was over. What had been the meaning of it? never to this day had she been quite able to make up her mind, nobody had talked to her of her mother's death. Instead of those lingerings upon the sad details, upon the last words, upon all the circumstances which preceded that catastrophe, which are usual in such circumstances, there had been a hush of everything, which had driven the subject back upon her mind, and made her dwell upon it doubly. Time had a little effaced the impression, but the return to the Square had brought it back again in greater force, and in those lonely hours which the girl had spent there at first, left to her own resources, many a perplexed and perplexing fancy had crowded her mind. The new life, however, which had set in later, the companionship, the gentle gaieties, the new sentiment, altogether strange and wonderful, which had arisen in her young bosom, had quietly pushed forth all painful thoughts. But now, with the pang of parting already in her heart, and the sense, so easily taken up at her years and so tragically felt, that life never could again be what it had been—a certain pang of opposition to her father had come into Cara's mind. Going

away!—to break her heart and alter her life because he would not bear the associations of his home! was a man thus, after having all that was good in existence himself, to deprive others of their happiness for the sake of his recollections? but when this further revelation fell upon his conduct, Cara's whole heart turned and shrank from her father. She could not bear the suggestion, and yet it returned to her in spite of herself. The shame of it, the wrong of it, the confused and dark ideas of suspicion and doubt which had been moving vaguely in her mind, all came together in a painful jumble. She put away her flowers, flinging away half of them in the tumult of her thoughts. It was too peaceful an occupation, and left her mind too free for discussion with herself. The girl's whole being was roused, she scarcely knew why. Love! she had never thought of it, she did not know what it meant; and Oswald, whom her aunt supposed to entertain that wonderful occult sentiment for her, certainly did not do so; but found in her only a pleasant *confidante*, a friendly sympathiser. Something prevented Cara from inquiring further, from asking herself any questions. She did not venture even to think in the recesses of her delicate bosom, that Edward Meredith was anything more to her, or she to him, than was Miss Cherry. What was the use of asking why or wherefore? She had begun to be happy, happier certainly than she had been before; and here it was to end. The new world, so full of strange, undefined lights and reflections, was to break up like a dissolving view, and the old world to settle down again with all its old shadows. The thought brought a few hot, hasty tears to her eyes whenever it surprised her as it did now. Poor inconsistent child! She forgot how dull the Square had been when she came, how bitterly she had regretted her other home in those long dreary evenings when there was no sound in the house except the sound of the hall-door closing upon her father when he went out. Ah! upon her father as he went out! He who was old, whose life was over (for fifty is old age to seventeen), he could not tolerate the interruption of his habits, of his talk with his friend; but she in the first flush of her beginning was to be shut out from everything, banished from *her* friends without a word! And then there crept on Cara's mind a recollection of those evening scenes over the fire: Aunt Cherry bending her brows over her needlework, and Edward reading in the light of the lamp.

How innocent it was; how sweet; and it was all over, and for what? Poor little Cara's mind seemed to turn round. That sense of falsehood and insincerity even in the solid earth under one's feet, which is the most bewildering and sickening of all moral sensations, overcame her. It was for her mother's sake, because of the love he bore her, that he could not be at ease in this room, which had been so specially her mother's; all those years while he had been wandering, it was because the loss of his wife was fresh upon his mind, and the blow so bitter that he could not resume his old life; but now what was this new breaking up of his life? Not for her mother's sake, but for Mrs. Meredith's! Cara paused with her head swimming, and looked round her to see if anything was steady in the sudden whirl. What was steady? Oswald, whom everybody (she could see) supposed to be 'in love,' whatever that was, with herself, was, as she knew, 'in love,' as he called it, with somebody else. Cara did not associate her own sentiments for anyone with that feeling which Oswald expressed for Agnes, but she felt that her own position was false, as his position was false, and Mrs. Meredith's and her father's. Was there nothing in the world that was true?

The next day or two was filled with somewhat dolorous arrangements for breaking up again the scarcely-established household. Miss Cherry occupied herself with many sighs in packing away the silver, shutting up the linen, all the household treasures, and covering the furniture with pin-fores. Cara's clothes were in process of packing, Cara's room was being dismantled. Mr. Beresford's well-worn port-manteaux had been brought out, and John and Cook, half-pleased at the renewed leisure which began to smile upon them, half-vexed at the cessation of their importance as purveyors for and managers of their master's 'establishment,' were looking forward to the great final 'cleaning up,' which was to them the chief event of the whole. All was commotion in the house. The intercourse with the house next door had partially ceased; Oswald still came in the morning, and Edward in the evening; but there had been no communication between the ladies of the two houses since the evening when Mr. Beresford took final leave of Mrs. Meredith. To say that there were not hard thoughts of her in the minds of the Beresfords would be untrue, and yet it was impossible that

anyone could have been more innocent than she was. All that she had done was to be kind, which was her habit and nature. 'But too kind,' Miss Cherry said privately to herself, 'too kind! Men must not be too much encouraged. They should be kept in their place,' and then the good soul cried at the thought of being hard upon her neighbour. As for Cara, she never put her thoughts on the subject into words, being too much wounded by the mere suggestion. But in her mind, too, there was a sense that Mrs. Meredith must be wrong. It could not be but that she must be wrong; and they avoided each other by instinct. After poor James was gone, Miss Cherry promised herself she would call formally and bid good-by to that elderly enchantress who had made poor James once more an exile. Nothing could exceed now her pity for 'poor James.' She forgot the darts with which she herself had slain him, and all that had been said to his discredit. He was the sufferer now, which was always enough to turn the balance of Miss Cherry's thoughts.

When things had arrived at this pitch, a sudden and extraordinary change occurred all at once in Mr. Beresford's plans. For a day no communications whatever took place between No. 7 and No. 8 in the Square. Oswald did not come in the morning—which was a thing that might be accounted for; but Edward did not appear in the evening—which was more extraordinary. Miss Cherry had brought out her art-needlework, notwithstanding the forlorn air of semi-dismantling which the drawing-room had already assumed, and Cara had her hemming ready. 'It will only be for a night or two more,' said Miss Cherry, 'and we may just as well be comfortable;' but she sighed; and as for Cara, the expression of her young countenance had changed altogether to one of nervous and impatient trouble. She was pale, her eyes had a fitful glimmer. Her aunt's little ways fretted her as they had never done before. Now and then a sense of the intolerable seized upon the girl. She would not put up with the little daily contradictions to which everybody is liable. She would burst out into words of impatience altogether foreign to her usual character. She was fretted beyond her powers of endurance. But at this moment she calmed down again. She acquiesced in Miss Cherry's little speech and herself drew the chairs into their usual places, and got the book which Edward had been reading to them. The ladies were very quiet,

expecting their visitor ; the fire sent forth little puffs of flame and crackles of sound, the clock ticked softly, everything else was silent. Cara fell into a muse of many fancies, more tranquil than usual, for the idea that he would not come had not entered her mind. At least they would be happy to-night. This thought lulled her into a kind of feverish tranquillity, and even kept her from rousing, as Miss Cherry did, to the sense that he had not come at his usual hour and might not be coming. 'Edward is very late,' Miss Cherry said at last. 'Was there any arrangement made, Cara, that he was not to come?'

'Arrangement? that he was not to come!'

'My dear,' said good Miss Cherry, who had been very dull for the last hour, 'you have grown so strange in your ways. I don't want to blame you, Cara; but how am I to know? Oswald comes in the morning and Edward in the evening; but how am I to know? If one has said more to you than the other, if you think more of one than the other, you never tell me. Cara, is it quite right, dear? I thought you would have told me that day that Oswald came and wanted to see you alone; of course, we know what that meant; but you evaded all my questions; you never would tell me.'

'Aunt Cherry, it was because there was nothing to tell. I told you there would be nothing.'

'Then there ought to have been something, Cara. One sees what Edward feels, poor boy, and I am very sorry for him. And it is hard upon him—hard upon us all to be so treated. Young people ought to be honest in these matters. Yes, dear, it is quite true. I am not pleased. I have not been pleased ever since ——'

'Aunt Cherry,' said the girl, her face crimson, her eyes full of tears, 'why do you upbraid me now—is this the moment? As if I were not unhappy enough. What does Edward feel? Does he too expect me to tell him of something that does not exist?'

'Poor Edward! All I can say is, that if we are unhappy, he is unhappy too, and unhappier than either you or me, for he is —— Poor boy; but he is young and he will get over it,' said Miss Cherry with a deep sigh.

'Oh, hush! hush! but tell me of him—hush!' said Cara, eagerly; 'I hear him coming up the stairs.'

There was someone certainly coming up stairs, but it was

not Edward's youthful footstep, light and springy. It was a heavier and slower tread. They listened, somewhat breathless, being thus stopped in an interesting discussion, and wondered at the slow approach of these steps. At last the door opened slowly, and Mr. Beresford, with some letters in his hand, came into the room. He came quite up to them before he said anything. The envelope which he held in his hand seemed to have contained both the open letters which he carried along with it, and one of them had a black edge. He was still running his eyes over this as he entered the room.

'I think,' he said, standing with his hand upon Cara's table, at the place where Edward usually sat, 'that you had better stop your packing for the moment. An unfortunate event has happened, and I do not think now that I can go away—not so soon at least; it would be heartless, it would be unkind!'

'What is it?' cried Miss Cherry, springing to her feet. 'Oh, James, not any bad news from the Hill?'

'No, no; nothing that concerns us. The fact is,' said Mr. Beresford, gazing into the dim depths of the mirror and avoiding their eyes, 'Mr. Meredith, the father of the boys, has just died in India. The news has come only to-day.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

THE news which had produced so sudden and startling an effect upon the inmates of No. 7 had been known early in the morning of the same day to the inmates of No. 8. This it was which had prevented either of the young men from paying their ordinary visits; but the wonder was that no rumour should have reached at least the kitchen of Mr. Beresford's house of the sad news which had arrived next door. Probably the reason was that the servants were all fully occupied, and had no time for conversation. The news had come early, conveyed by Mr. Sommerville personally, and by post from the official head-quarters, for Mr. Meredith was a civil servant of standing and distinction. There was nothing extraordinary or terrible in it. He had been seized

with one of the rapid diseases of the climate, and had succumbed like so many other men, leaving everything behind him settled and in order. It was impossible that a well-regulated and respectable household could have been carried on with less reference to the father of the children, and nominal master of the house, than Mrs. Meredith's was; but perhaps this was one reason why his loss fell upon them all like a thunderbolt. Dead! no one had ever thought of him as a man who could die. The event brought him near them as with the rapidity of lightning. Vaguely in their minds, or at least in the wife's mind, there had been the idea of some time or other making up to him for that long separation and estrangement—how, she did not inquire, and when, she rather trembled to think of, but some time. The idea of writing a kinder letter than usual to him had crossed her mind that very morning. They did not correspond much; they had mutually found each other incompatible, unsuitable, and lately Mrs. Meredith had been angry with the distant husband, who had been represented as disapproving of her. But this morning, no later, some thrill of more kindly feeling had moved her. She had realised all at once that it might be hard for him to be alone in the world, and without that solace of the boys, which from indifference, or from compunction, he had permitted her to have without interference all these years. She had thought that after all it was cruel, after such a long time, to deny him a share in his own children, and she had resolved, being in a serious mood and agitated state of mind, to make the sacrifice, or to attempt to make the sacrifice more freely, and to write to him to express her gratitude to him for leaving her both the boys so long; had not he a right to them no less than hers?—in the eye of nature no less, and in the eye of the law more. Yet he had been generous to her, and had never disputed her possession of her children. These were the softening thoughts that had filled her mind before she came downstairs. And no sooner had she come down than the news arrived. He was dead. When those die who are the most beloved and cherished, the best and dearest, that calamity which rends life asunder and overclouds the world for us, has seldom in it the same sickening vertigo of inappropriateness which makes the soul sick when someone essentially earthly is suddenly carried away into the unseen, with which he seems to have had nothing to do all

his previous life. He! *dead!* a man so material, of the lower earth. What could dying be to him? What connection had he with the mystery and solemnity of the unseen? The vulgar and commonplace awe us more at these dread portals than the noble or great. What have they to do there? What had a man like Mr. Meredith to do there? Yet he had gone, no one knowing, and accomplished that journey which classes those who have made it, great and small, with the gods. A hundred discordant thoughts entered into his wife's mind—compunction, and wonder, and solemn trembling. Could he have known what she had been thinking that morning? Was it some dumb approach of his soul to hers which had aroused these more tender thoughts? Had he been aware of all that had gone on in her mind since the time when, she knowing of it, he had died? Nature has always an instinctive certainty, whatever philosophy may say against it, and however little religion may say in favour of it, that this sacred and mysterious event of death somehow enlarges and expands the being of those who have passed under its power. Since we lost them out of our sight, it seems so necessary to believe that they see through us more than ever they did, and know what is passing within the hearts to which they were kindred. Why should the man, who living had concerned himself so little about what his wife did, *know* now instantaneously all about it, having died? She could not have given a reason, but she felt it to be so. The dark ocean, thousands of miles of it, what was that to an emancipated soul? He had died in India; but he was there, passing mysteriously through the doors, standing by her, 'putting things into her head,' in this corner of England. Which of us has not felt the same strange certainty? All at once the house seemed full of him, even to the children, who had scarcely known him. He was dead; passed into a world which mocks at distance, which knows nothing of fatigue. He was as God in some mysterious way, able to be everywhere, able to influence the living unconsciously, seeing, hearing them—simply because he was dead, and had become to mortal vision incapable of either seeing or hearing more.

There is nothing more usual than to rail at the dreadful and often unduly prolonged moment between death and the final ceremonial which clears us away from cumbering the living soil any longer; but this moment is often a blessing to

the survivors. In such a case as this 'the bereaved family' did not know what to do. How were they to gain that momentary respite from the common round? If the blinds were drawn down, and the house shut up, according to the usual formula, that would be purely fictitious; for of course he had been buried long ago. Edward paused with the shutter in his hand when about to close it, struck by this reflection, and Oswald gave vent to it plainly—'What's the good? he's in his grave long ago.' Mrs. Meredith had retired to her room on the receipt of the news, where her maid took her her cup of tea; and the young men sat down again, and ate their breakfast, as it were under protest, ashamed of themselves for the good appetites they had, and cutting off here and there a corner of their usual substantial meal, to prove to themselves that they were not quite without feeling. What were they to do to make the fact evident that they had just heard of their father's death, and to separate this day, which was to them as the day of his death, from other days? They were very much embarrassed to know how they were to manage this. To abstain altogether from their usual occupations was the only thing which instinctively occurred to them. They sat down after breakfast was over, as though it had been a doubly solemn dolorous Sunday, on which they could not even go to church. Edward was doubtful even about *The Times*, and Oswald hesitated about going to his smoking-room as usual. A cigar seemed a levity when there was a death in the house. On the whole, however, it was Oswald who settled the matter most easily, for he began a copy of verses, 'To the memory of my Father,' which was a very suitable way indeed of getting through the first hours, and amusing too.

The house was very still all the morning, and then there was another subdued meal. Meals are a great thing to fall back upon when young persons of healthful appetite, not broken down by grief, feel themselves compelled to decorous appearance of mourning. By this time Oswald and Edward both felt that not to eat was an absurd way of doing honour to their dead father, and accordingly they had an excellent luncheon; though their mother still 'did not feel able,' her maid reported, to come down. After this the two young men went out together to take a walk. This, too, was a kind of solemn Sabbatical exercise, which they had not taken in the

same way since they were boys at school together. When they met any acquaintance, one of them would bow formally, or stretch out a hand to be shaken, passing on, too grave for talk, while the other paused to explain the 'bad news' they had received. When it was a friend of Oswald's, Edward did this, and when it was Edward's friend, Oswald did it. This little innocent solemn pantomime was so natural and instinctive that it impressed everyone more or less, and themselves most of all. They began to feel a certain importance in their position, enjoying the sympathy, the kind and pitying looks of all they met as they strolled along slowly arm-in-arm. They had not been so much united, or felt so strong a connection with each other, for years. Then they began to discuss in subdued tones the probable issues. 'Will it change our position?' Edward asked.

'I think not, unless to better it,' said Oswald. 'I don't think you need go to India now unless you like.'

He had just said this, when they were both addressed by someone coming up behind them, as hasty and business-like as they were languid and solemn.

'I say, can you tell me whereabouts the India Office is?' said the new comer. 'Good-morning. I shouldn't have disturbed you but that I remembered you were going to India too. I'm in for my last Exam., that is, I shall be directly, and I've got something to do at the India Office; but the fact is, I don't know where to go.'

It was Edward who directed him, Oswald standing by holding his brother's arm. Roger Burchell was very brisk, looking better than usual in the fresh spring sunshine, and Oswald's eye was caught by his face, which was like someone he had seen recently—he could not remember where—the ruddy, mellow, warmly-toned complexion, brown eyes, and dusky gold of the hair. Who was it? Roger, being out of his depth in London, was glad to see faces he knew, even though he loved them little; and then he had heard that Cara was to return to the Hill, and felt that he had triumphed, and feared them no more.

'I hope your neighbours are well?' he said. 'They are coming back, I hear, to the country. I suppose they don't care for London after being brought up in a country place? I should not myself.'

'Mr. Beresford is going abroad,' said Edward, coldly.

‘Everybody is going abroad, I think; but few people so far as we are. I don’t think I should care for the Continent—just the same old thing over and over; but India should be all fresh. You are going to India too, ain’t you? at least, that is what I heard.’

‘I am not sure,’ said Edward. ‘The truth is, we have had very bad news this morning. My father died at Calcutta ——’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ said Roger, who had kind feelings. ‘I should not have stopped you had I known; I thought you both looked grave. I am very sorry. I hope you don’t mind ——?’

‘Don’t mind my father’s death?’

‘Oh, I mean don’t mind my having stopped you. Perhaps it was rude; but I said to myself, “Here is someone I know.” Don’t let me detain you now. I am very sorry, but I wish you were coming to India,’ said Roger, putting out his big fist to shake hands. Oswald eluded the grip, but Edward took it cordially. He was not jealous of Roger, but divined in him an unfortunate love like his own.

‘Poor fellow!’ Edward said as they went on.

‘Poor fellow!—why poor fellow? he is very well off. He is the very sort of man to get on; he has no feelings, no sensitiveness, to keep him back.’

‘It is scarcely fair to decide on such slight acquaintance that he has no feelings; but he is going to India.’

‘Ned, you are a little bit of a fool, though you’re a clever fellow. Going to India is the very best thing a man can do. My mother has always made a fuss about it.’

‘And yourself ——’

‘Myself! I am not the sort of fellow. I am no good. I get dead beat; but you that are all muscle and sinew, and that have no tie except my mother ——’

‘That to be sure,’ said Edward with a sigh, and he wondered did his brother now at last mean to be confidential and inform him of the engagement with Cara? His heart began to beat more quickly. How different that real sentiment was from the fictitious one which they had both been playing with! Edward’s breath came quickly. Yes, it would be better to know it—to get it over; and then there would be no further uncertainty; but at the same time he was afraid—afraid both of the fact and of Oswald’s way of telling it. If Cara’s name

was spoken with levity, how should he be able to bear it? Needless to say, however, that Oswald had no intention of talking about Cara, and nothing to disclose on that subject at least.

'You that have no tie—except my mother,' repeated Oswald, '(and of course she would always have me), I would think twice before I gave up India. It's an excellent career, nothing better. The governor (poor old fellow) did very well, I have always heard, and you would do just as well, or more so, with the benefit of his connection. I wonder rather that my mother kept us out of the Indian set, except the old Spy. Poor old man, I daresay he will be cut up about this. He'll know better than anyone,' continued Oswald, with a change of tone, 'what arrangements have been made.'

'I wonder if it will be long before we can hear?' Thus they went on talking in subdued tones, the impression gradually wearing off, and even the feeling of solemn importance—the sense that, though not unhappy, they ought to conduct themselves with a certain gravity of demeanour becoming sons whose father was just dead. They had no very distinct impression about the difference to be made in their own future, and even Oswald was not mercenary in the ordinary sense of the word. He thought it would be but proper and right that he should be made 'an eldest son;' but he did not think it likely—and in that case, though he would be absolutely independent, he probably would not be very rich—not rich enough to make work on his own part unnecessary. So the excitement on this point was mild. They could not be worse off than they were—that one thing he was sure of, and for the rest, one is never sure of anything. By this time they had reached the region of Clubs. Oswald thought there was nothing out of character in just going in for half an hour to see the papers. A man must see the papers whoever lived or died. When the elder brother unbent thus far, the younger brother went home. He found his mother still in her own room taking a cup of tea. She had been crying, for her eyes were red, and she had a shawl wrapped round her, the chill of sudden agitation and distress having seized upon her. Mr. Meredith's picture, which had not hitherto occupied that place of honour, had been placed above her mantelpiece, and an old Indian box, sweet with the pungent odour of the sandal-wood, stood on the little table at

her elbow. 'I was looking over some little things your dear papa gave me, long before you were born,' she said, with tears in her voice. 'Oh, my poor John!'

'Mother, you must not think me unfeeling; but I knew so little of him.'

'Yes, that was true—yes, that was true. Oh, Edward, I have been asking myself was it my fault? But I could not live in India, and he was so fond of it. He was always well. He did not understand how anyone could be half killed by the climate. I never should have come home but for the doctors, Edward.'

She looked at him so appealingly that Edward felt it necessary to take all the responsibility unhesitatingly upon himself. 'I am sure you did not leave him as long as you could help it, mother.'

'No, I did not—that is just the truth—as long as I could help it; but it does seem strange that we should have been parted for so much of our lives. Oh, what a comfort it is, Edward, to feel that whatever misunderstanding there might be, he knows all and understands everything *now*!'

'With larger, other eyes than ours,' said Edward piously, and the boy believed it in the confidence of his youth. But how the narrow-minded commonplace man who had been that distinguished civil servant, John Meredith, should all at once have come to this godlike greatness by the mere fact of dying, neither of them could have told. Was it nature in them that asserted it to be so? or some prejudice of education and tradition so deeply woven into their minds that they did not know it to be anything but nature? But be it instinct or be it prejudice, what more touching sentiment ever moved a human bosom? He had not been a man beloved in his life; but he was as the gods now.

By-and-by, however—for reverential and tender as this sentiment was, it was neither love nor grief, and could not pretend to the dominion of these monarchs of the soul—the mother and son fell into talk about secondary matters. She had sent for her dressmaker about her mourning, and given orders for as much crape as could be piled upon one not gigantic female figure, and asked anxiously if the boys had done their part—had got the proper depth of hatbands, the black studs, &c., that were wanted. 'I suppose you may have very dark grey for the mourning; but it must be *very* dark,' she said.

'And you, mother, must you wear that cap—that mountain of white stuff?'

'Certainly, my dear,' said Mrs. Meredith with fervour. 'You don't think I would omit any sign of respect? And what do I care whether it is becoming or not? Oh, Edward, your dear papa has a right to all that we can do to show respect.'

There was a faltering in her lip as of something more she had to say, but decorum restrained her. That first day nothing ought to be thought of, nothing should be mentioned, she felt, in which consolation had a part. But when the night came after that long, long day, which they all felt to be like a year, the secret comfort in her heart came forth as she bade her boy good-night. 'Edward, oh, I wish you had gone years ago, when you might have been a comfort to him! but now that there is no need——' Here she stopped and kissed him, and looked at him with a smile in her wet eyes, which, out of 'respect,' she would no more have suffered to come to her lips than she would have worn pink ribbons in her cap, and said quickly, 'You need not go to India now.'

This was the blessing with which she sent him away from her. She cried over it afterwards, in penitence looking at her husband's portrait, which had been brought out of a corner in the library downstairs. Poor soul, it was with a pang of remorse that she felt she was going to be happy in her widow's mourning. If she could have restrained herself, she would have kept in these words expressive of a latent joy which came by means of sorrow. She stood and looked at the picture with a kind of prayer for pardon in her heart—Oh, forgive me! with once more that strange confidence that death had given the attributes of God to the man who was dead. If he was near, as she felt him to be, and could hear the breathing of that prayer in her heart, then surely, as Edward said, it was with 'larger, other eyes' that he must look upon her, understanding many things which up to his last day he had not been able to understand.

But they were all very glad when the day was over—that first day which was not connected with the melancholy business or presence of death which 'the family' are supposed to suffer from so deeply, yet which proves a kind of chapel and seclusion for any grief which is not of the deepest and most overwhelming kind. The Merediths would have been

glad even of a mock funeral, a public assuming of the trappings of woe, a distinct period after which life might be taken up again. But there was nothing at all to interrupt their life, and the whole affair remained unauthentic and strange to them. Meanwhile, in the house next door these strange tidings had made a sudden tumult. The packings had been stopped. The servants were angry at their wasted trouble; the ladies both silenced and startled, with thoughts in their minds less natural and peaceful than the sympathy for Mrs. Meredith, which was the only feeling they professed. As for Mr. Beresford himself, it would be difficult to describe his feelings, which were of a very strange and jumbled character. He was glad to have the bondage taken off his own movements, and to feel that he was free to go where he pleased, to visit as he liked; and the cause of his freedom was not really one which moved him to sorrow though it involved many curious and uncomfortable questions. How much better the unconscious ease of his feelings had been before anyone had meddled! but now so many questions were raised! Yet his mind was relieved of that necessity of immediate action which is always so disagreeable to a weak man. Yes, his mind was entirely relieved. He took a walk about his room, feeling that by-and-by it would be his duty to go back again to Mrs. Meredith's drawing-room to ask what he could do for her, and give her his sympathy. Not to-night, but soon; perhaps even to-morrow. The cruel pressure of force which had been put upon him, and which he had been about to obey by the sacrifice of all his comforts, relaxed and melted away. It was a relief, an undeniable relief; but yet it was not all plain-sailing—the very relief was an embarrassment too.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TAKING UP DROPT STITCHES.

NEXT day Mr. Beresford paid Mrs. Meredith a visit of condolence. It was natural and necessary, considering their friendship; but the manner in which that friendship had been interrupted, and the occasion upon which it was resumed, were both embarrassing. It had been a short note from Max-

well which had communicated the news to him, and in this it had been taken for granted that he would now remain at home. Old Mr. Sommerville had himself communicated the information to Maxwell, and his letter was enclosed. 'I hear your friend Beresford had made up his mind to go away, out of consideration for Mrs. Meredith,' he had written, 'which was very gentlemanly on his part, and showed fine feeling. I think it right accordingly to let you know at once of the great change which has taken place in her position. I have received the news this morning of her husband and my poor friend John Meredith's death at Calcutta on the 3rd inst. It was sudden, but not quite unexpected, as he had been suffering from fever. This of course changes Mrs. Meredith's situation altogether. She is now a widow, and of course responsible to no one. I would not for the world be answerable for depriving her of the sympathy of a kind friend, *which may in the long run be so important for her*, at a period of trouble. So I trust you will communicate the news to your friend with the least possible delay. I have not seen Mrs. Meredith; but as they have been long separated, I do not doubt that she bears the loss with Christian composure,' said the sharp-witted old man. 'I send you old Sommerville's letter,' Mr. Maxwell added on his own account; 'it does not require any comment of mine; and of course you will act as you think proper; but my own opinion is, that he is an old busybody, making suggestions of patent absurdity.' Mr. Beresford was much nettled by this note. Whatever Sommerville's suggestion might mean it was for him to judge of it, not Maxwell, who thrust himself so calmly into other people's business. Sommerville's letter might not have pleased him by itself, but Maxwell's gloss was unpardonable. He tore it up and threw it into his wastebasket with unnecessary energy. But for that perhaps he might have felt more abashed by the embarrassing character of the reunion; but being thus schooled, he rebelled. He went to the house next door in the afternoon, towards the darkening. The spring sunshine had died away, and the evening was cold as winter almost. There had been no reception that day—visitor after visitor had been sent away with the news of the 'bereavement.' The same word has to be used whether the loss is one which crushes all delight out of life, or one which solemnly disturbs the current for a moment, to leave it only brighter than before. All the servants at Mrs. Meredith's were

preternaturally solemn. The aspect of the house could not have been more funereal had half the population succumbed. Already, by some wonderful effort of millinery, the maids as well as their mistress had got their black gowns.

Mrs. Meredith herself sat in the drawing-room, crape from head to foot, in all the crispness of a fresh widow's cap. Never was black so black, or white so white. She had an innocent satisfaction in heaping up this kind of agony. Already a design drawn by Oswald was in the hands of the goldsmith for a locket to hold her husband's hair. She would not bate a jot of anything that the most bereaved mourner could do to show her 'respect.' Even the tears were ready, and they were sincere tears. A pang of compunction, a pang of regret, of remorseful pity and tenderness, melted her heart, and there was a certain pleasure of melancholy in all this which made it spontaneous. It was the very luxury of sentiment, to be able to feel your heart untouched underneath, and yet to be so deeply, unfeignedly sorry, to be so true a mourner at so little real cost. Mrs. Meredith held out her hand to her visitor as he came in—he was the only one whom she had received.

'This is kind,' she said—'very kind. As you were always such a good friend to us, I could not say no to you.'

'I was very sorry,' he said; as indeed what else was there to say?

'Oh, yes, I knew you would feel for us. It was so sudden—quite well when the last mail came in, and this one to bring such news! You scarcely knew him; and, oh, I feel it so much now, that none of my friends, that not even the boys knew him as they ought to have known him. It seems as if it must have been my fault.'

'That it could never have been. You must not reproach yourself; though one always does, however the loss happens,' he said, in a low and sorrowful tone. He was thinking of his wife, for whom he had mourned with the intensity of despair; but the same words answered both cases. He stood as he had done the last time he was there, not looking at her in her panoply of mourning, but looking dreamily into the fire. And she cried a little, with a childish sob in her throat. The grief was perfectly real, childlike, and innocent. He was much more affected by the recollection of that last meeting at which he had taken leave of her than she was—he remembered it

better. The new incident even kept her from seeing anything more than the most ordinary every-day fact, one friend coming to see another, in his return.

‘I suppose you have no details?’

‘Not one. We cannot hear till the next mail. It will be some comfort to have particulars. Poor John! he was always so strong, one never had any fear. I was the one that could not stand the climate; and yet I am left and he is taken!’

‘But you have not been exposed to the climate,’ said Mr. Beresford. She was not wise in these expressions of her personal grief, though her friends always thought her so wise in her sympathy. She resumed softly:

‘I have no fears about the boys to embitter my grief. I know they will be well cared for. He was so good a father, though he had them so little with him. Oh, why did you not tell me to send him one of the boys?’

Mr. Beresford would have felt himself the cruellest of malignants, had he ventured to make such a suggestion in former days, but he did not say this now. ‘You did what you thought was best for them,’ he said.

‘Ah, yes,’ she said eagerly, ‘for them; there was their education to be thought of. That was what I considered; but I do not think—do you think,’ she added, with an unconscious clasping of her hands and entreating look, ‘that, since the great occasion for it is over—Edward need go to India now?’

The form of the speech was that of an assertion—the tone that of a question. She might follow her own inclinations like other people; but she liked to have them sanctioned and approved by her friends.

‘Surely not, if you don’t wish it. There is only your wish to be considered.’

‘It is not myself I am thinking of. It is for him,’ she said, faltering. Of all things that could happen to her, she was least willing to allow that her own will or wish had any share in her decisions. It was a weakness which perhaps the more enlightened of her friends were already aware of. As for Mr. Beresford, he was more critical of her than ever he had been before, although more entirely sympathetic, more ready to throw himself into her service. She looked at him so anxiously. She wanted his opinion and the support of his concurrence. There was nothing for him to do, to be of use

as he proposed, but to agree with her, to support what she had thought of—that was friendship indeed.

On the next day Miss Cherry paid a similar visit of condolence, but she was not so tenderly sympathetic as, under other circumstances, she would naturally have been. She looked at the new-made widow with a critical eye. A short time before no one had been more anxious than Miss Cherry that Mrs. Meredith should suffer no harm, should lose no tittle of respect due to her. She had with her own soft hand struck a blow, the severity of which astonished herself, at her favourite and only brother on Mrs. Meredith's account; but the sudden revolution in their neighbour's affairs, instead of touching her heart, closed it. The position was changed, and a hundred tremors and terrors took at once possession of her gentle bosom. Who could doubt what James would wish now—what James would do? and who could doubt that the woman who had permitted him so intimate a friendship would respond to these wishes? This idea leaped at once into the minds of all the lookers-on. Old Sommerville sent the news with a chuckle of grim cynicism yet kindness; Maxwell communicated it with a grudge; and Miss Cherry received it with an instant conviction yet defiance. They had no doubt of what would, nay, must ensue, and jumped at the conclusion with unanimous agreement; and it would be quite true to say that Mr. Meredith's death brought quite as great a pang to Miss Cherry, who had never seen him, as it did to his wife, though in a different way. If the first marriage, the natural youthful beginning of serious life, brings often with it a train of attendant embarrassments, almost miseries, what is a second marriage to do? Good Miss Cherry's maidenly mind was shocked by the idea that her brother, so long held up somewhat proudly by the family as an example of conjugal fidelity and true sorrow, had allowed feelings less exalted to get possession of him. And what would Cara do? How would her imaginative delicate being, too finely touched for common issues, conform to the vulgar idea of a stepmother? Miss Cherry grew hot and angry as she thought of it. And a man who had such a child, a grown-up daughter, sweetest and only fit substitute for the mother dead, what did he want with a new companion, a new love? Faugh! to use such a word disgusted her; and that James—*James!* the most heart-broken and inconsolable of mourners, should come to that!

With all this in her mind, it may be supposed that Miss Cherry's feelings when she went to see Mrs. Meredith and found her in all her crape, crying softly by the fire, were not so sweet as they ought to have been. She said the usual things in the way of consolation—how, as it was to be, perhaps it was best that they had heard of it all at once, and had not been kept in anxiety; and how she supposed such afflictions were necessary for us, though it was very sad that the dear boys had known so little of their father; but, on the other hand, how that fact must soften it to them all, for of course it was not as if he had died at home, where they would have felt the loss every day. This last speech had a sting in it, which was little intentional, and yet gave Miss Cherry a sense of remorse after it was said; for though she had a certain desire to give pain, momentary, and the result of much provocation, yet the moment the pain was given, it was herself who suffered most. 'This is what it is to have a soft nature; most people have at least a temporary satisfaction in the result when they have been able to inflict a wound.

'Oh, yes, my dear, she feels it, I suppose,' Miss Cherry said, when she returned. 'She was sitting over the fire, and the room much too warm for the season; for it is really like spring to-day. Of course a woman must feel it more or less when she has lost her husband. I have never been in these circumstances, but I don't see how one could help that—however little one cared for the man.'

'Did she care little for the man?' Cara was at the age when most things are taken for granted. She had not entered into any peculiarities in the position of Mrs. Meredith with her husband. She was like Hamlet, recognising more and more, as she realised her own position, the quagmires and unsafe footing round her—was this another? There was a sinking sensation in Cara's youthful mind, and a doubt and faltering wherever she thought to place her foot.

'My dear child,' said Miss Cherry, 'when a woman spends years after years away from her husband, never making any effort to join him, quite satisfied with a letter now and then, receiving her own friends, making a circle, going into society—while the poor man is toiling to keep it up, thousands and thousands of miles away'—here Miss Cherry paused, a little frightened by the blackness of the picture which she had herself drawn. 'I hope I am not doing anyone injustice,' she faltered.

'Oh, my dear, you may be sure I don't mean that. And I believe poor Mrs. Meredith could not stand the climate, and of course there was the boys' education to think of—children always must come home. Indeed, how anyone can settle in India knowing that their children must be sent away——'

'Aunt Cherry, no one is to be trusted,' said the girl, tears coming to her eyes; 'there is no truth anywhere. We are all making a pretence one way or another; pretending to care for people who are living, pretending to mourn for people who are dead; pretending that one thing is our object, while we are trying for another; pretending to be merry, pretending to be sad. Ah! it makes my heart sick!'

'Cara, Cara! What do you know about such things? They say it is so in the world, but you and I have very little to do with the world, dear. You must not think—indeed, indeed, you must not think that it is so with us.'

'I don't know anything of the world,' said Cara. 'I only know what is round me. If Mrs. Meredith is false, and papa false, and other people——'

'My dear,' said Miss Cherry, trembling a little, 'it is always dangerous to apply abstract principles so. When I say that Mrs. Meredith was a long time away from her husband, I do not say that she is *false*. Oh, Cara, no! that would be terrible. If I say anything, all I mean is that she could not be so grieved, not so *dreadfully* grieved, as a woman would be whose husband had been always with her. Think of the boys, for instance; they did not know him really; they may be very sorry; but, how different would it be if it was a father like your father! And other people—what do you mean by other people?'

'Nothing,' said Cara, turning away, for she could not reply to Miss Cherry's argument. Would she indeed, in her own person, grieve for her father more than the Merediths did for theirs? Here was another mystery unpenetrated by Miss Cherry, incomprehensible to herself. Nobody knew the gulf that lay between her and him, and she could not tell herself what it meant. How kind he had been to her, though she repaid him in this way; but did he love—really love—his child any more than she loved him? Did anybody love any other, or only pretend and go through the semblance of loving? She did not doubt her aunts, it is true; but then her certainty, in respect to them took, to some degree, the

form of indifference. Taken for granted, not inquired into, that love itself might have failed, perhaps—but Cara never thought of it as possible. It was like the sunny house it dwelt on, always open, due not to anything in her, but to the mere fact that she was Cara. They would have loved any other kind of girl, she said to herself, under the same name just as well. Poor child! she was like Hamlet, though unaware of that sublimity. Friends, lovers, relations, all had failed her. Every soul thought of himself—no one truly or unfeignedly of others. Her head swam, her heart sank, the firm ground gave way under her feet wherever she turned. It might not cost the others much, but it cost her a great deal; even she herself in her own person: did she love more truly than they did? No; she was not devoted to her father, nor to Oswald, whom she was supposed to care for; and if to—anyone else, then they did not care for her, Cara said to herself, and fled from her thoughts with a beating heart.

That evening there was an interchange of visits, something in the old fashion. Edward thought he might come in, in the evening, when the public about would not be scandalised by the idea that he was able to visit his friends so soon after his father's death; and Mr. Beresford said to himself that, surely he might go for a little to comfort his neighbour who was in trouble, and who had not herself been out of doors for these two long days. The young man and the older man crossed each other, but without meeting; and both of the visits were very pleasant. Miss Cherry was as kind to Edward as she had been cold to his mother. She got up to meet him and took his two hands in hers. She called him, inarticulately, her dear boy, and asked after his health tenderly, as if he had been ill. As for Cara, she did nothing but look at him with a wistful look, trying to read in his eyes what he felt; and when her aunt entered into the usual commonplaces about resignation to God's will, Cara broke in almost abruptly, impatient even of this amiable fiction.

'You forget what you were saying to-day,' she said: 'that Edward did not know his father, and therefore could not grieve as—I should.'

'That is quite true,' he said, 'and therefore it is a different kind of feeling. Not the grief that Cara would feel; but that painful sense of not being able to feel, which is almost worse. I never thought of my father—scarcely knew him. Some

time, of course, we were to meet—that was all; and gratitude to him, or any attempt to repay him, was not in my thoughts. And now it is impossible ever, in any place, were one to go to the world's end—or at any time, were one to live as long as Methuselah, to say a kind word to him, to try to make up to him a little. This is more painful than Cara's worst grief would be; knowing she had done everything, made everything bright.'

'Oh, no, no!' she said, putting up her hands.

'Ah, yes, yes!' he said, looking at her with melting eyes, softened and enlarged by the moisture in them, and smiling upon her. Cara, in her confusion, could not meet the look and the smile.

'Oh, Edward,' she said, 'it is you who are the best of us all. I am not good, as you think me. I am a sham, like all the rest; but if there is one that is true ——'

'Cara is foolish,' said Miss Cherry. 'I don't know what is come to her, Edward. She talks as if nobody was to be relied upon; but I suppose she is at the age of fancy, when girls take things into their heads. I remember when I was your age, my darling, I had a great many fancies too. And I am afraid I have some still, though I ought to know better. I suppose you will take your mother away somewhere, Edward, for a little change?'

'I have not heard anything about it, Miss Cherry; but there will be one change, most likely, very important to me, if I settle to do it. I need not go out to India now—unless I please.'

'Oh, Edward, I am so glad; for, of course, you would not wish it—you did not wish it?'

'No,' he said, slowly. 'I did not wish it; but, after all, if that seemed the best way to be good for something—to make some use of one's life ——'

He spoke to Miss Cherry, but his eyes were on Cara. If she had said anything; if she had even lifted her eyes; if she had made any sign to show that even as her brother—her husband's brother—he could be of use to her! But Cara made no reply either by word or look. She put her hand nervously upon the book which lay on the table—the book he had been reading.

'Oh, Cara, you must not think of that,' said Miss Cherry; 'we can't be so selfish as to ask Edward to read to-night.'

'Yes; let me read,' he said. 'Why should not I? I am glad to do anything after these two days. It seemed unkind to *him*, not to make some break in life—though I don't know why; and there is nothing within reach to do. Let me read.'

Then Cara looked at him, with eyes like his own, suffused; her heart was melting, her mind satisfied. 'But this is the one who does not care for me,' she was saying to herself.

Next door there was less conversation between the elder people. Mr. Beresford tried, indeed, to take upon him the part of consoler—to talk to her and lessen her burden; but that change of all their relations did not answer. He fell silent after a while, and she dried her eyes and began to talk to him. The maid who brought up tea announced that Missis had picked up wonderful; while the other servants in the kitchen looked at each other, and shook their heads.

'Anyhow, *that's* better than the other way,' the cook said, oracularly, 'and we knows what we has before us—if the young gentlemen don't find nothing to say.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LITTLE EMMY'S VISITORS.

OSWALD had found his particular pursuit interrupted by his father's death. He could not go that day, which happened to be the hospital day, to meet Agnes at the gate; indeed, for once, his own inclinations were, for the moment, driven out of his head; and, in the many things there were to think of, from hatbands upwards, he forgot that this was the day on which alone he could secure a little conversation with the object of his thoughts. When the recollection flashed upon him in the evening, he was more disturbed than was at all usual to his light-hearted nature. What would she think of him? that he had deserted her, after compromising her; an idea equally injurious to his pride and to his affection; for he had so much real feeling about Agnes, that he was not self-confident where she was concerned, and shrank from the idea of appearing in an unfavourable light. Ordinarily, Oswald did not suppose that anyone was likely to look at him in an unfavourable light. And then there was the fear which

sprang up hastily within him that this day which he had missed might be the last hospital day. Little Emmy had been gradually getting better, and when she was discharged, what means would he have of seeing Agnes? This thought took away all the pleasure from his cigar, and made him pace back and forward in his room, in all the impatience of impotence, ready to upbraid his father with dying at such an inconvenient moment. Yesterday would not have mattered, or to-morrow—but to-day! How often, Oswald reflected, it happens like this in human affairs. Given an unoccupied day, when an anything might occur without disturbing your arrangement—when, indeed, you have no engagements, and are perfectly free and at the command of fate—nothing, even under the most favourable circumstances, happens; but let it be a moment when something very urgent is on your hands, when you have an opportunity that may never occur again, and immediately earth and heaven conspire to fill it with accidents, and to prevent its necessary use. At that hour, however, nothing could be done. It was nearly midnight, and the House, with all its swarms of children and kindly attendants, must be wrapped in the sleep of the innocent. Would Agnes, he asked himself, share that sleep, or would any troubled thoughts be in her mind touching the stranger who had so sought her society, and who had exposed her to reproof, and then left her to bear it as she might? This, it is to be feared, drove out of Oswald's mind any feeling he might have had for his father. In any case, such feeling would have been short-lived. He had no visionary compunctions, such as Edward had, though it was Oswald, not Edward, who was supposed to be the poetical one of the brothers; but then Edward was not 'in love,' at least not in Oswald's way. A week had to elapse before the day on which he could hope to see Agnes again, and this contrariety made him more earnest in his determination to let nothing stand in his way a second time. He was so eager, indeed, that he neglected what would otherwise have been so important in his eyes—the arrival of the mail, which brought definite information as to Mr. Meredith's property, and must settle what his own prospects were to be.

No man could give a warmer evidence of his love than this he felt within himself as he took his way towards the hospital. During the intervening week he had seen the little

teacher almost daily, accompanying the procession of school-girls, and she had, he thought, been conscious that he was there, though she would not look at him. Naturally, Oswald made all he could of his deep hatband, his black gloves, and even the black border of his handkerchief, as he crossed the line; and once he felt that Agnes perceived these indications of woe in a quick glance she gave at him, though she avoided his eyes. This then was a point in his favour—if only little Emmy were still at the hospital. This time he was more bold than usual, and asked to be admitted to see the child, explaining who he was, and what was his connection with the accident. In this respect he took upon himself more than was necessary, blaming himself for being the cause of it—and at length got admittance, his mourning naturally standing him in stead with all the officials. Little Emmy had been by this time transported into the convalescent ward, and was lying on a sofa there, very bright-eyed and pale, looking eagerly, as Oswald saw, with a leap of his heart, for some visitor. When she perceived him a cloud of disappointment passed over her little face, then a glimpse of surprise and recognition, then the swift-rising colour of weakness.

‘Do you know me?’ said Oswald, taking the chair the nurse offered him.

‘Oh, yes!’ cried the child, with a mixture of awe and delight. No further preliminaries were necessary.

He listened, with patience, to an account of all the stages of her recovery, and delicately introduced his own inquiries. The ladies at the House had been very kind to her; had they not? They had come to see her?

‘Oh, yes, sir,’ cried little Emmy. ‘Miss Burchell came every week, and Sister Mary Jane has been twice. Miss Burchell is the kindest of all. I thought she was coming to-day; oh, isn’t she coming to-day?’ the child added, after a pause, looking at him with rising tears. ‘Did she send you instead, please?’ and though Oswald was so grand a gentleman, and his inquiries filled her with pride, yet his possible substitution for her more beloved visitor made Emmy ready to cry. Oswald did not like to be thus thrust into a secondary place, even with a child. A momentary irritation arose in his mind; then he laughed and forgave Emmy, remembering who it was that she preferred to him.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said; ‘I have not come instead of

Miss—did you say Burchell? Is she one of the Sisters?' he asked, hypocritically. 'I thought you called them by their Christian names.'

'Oh, sir, Miss Burchell is not a Sister. She is the teacher. I am in the third division,' said the child, with pride; 'and she teaches us. She is a lady—not like Miss Davies, in the infant school, you know; but a real, real lady. And all the Sisters are ladies. It is for goodness they take care of us, and not because they are obliged. Such a trouble as they take!' said little Emmy, with the *naïve* surprise of her class, 'and for nothing at all! And Miss Burchell is the kindest of them all.'

'She has come to see you very often?'

'Oh, sir, every open day! and she told me that—that—you had come to ask for me. She said it was so good and kind. She said, sir, as you were a very kind gentleman, and took an interest in poor children—especially orphans like me.'

'Yes; I take a great interest in you, my poor little Emmy,' said Oswald, blushing with pleasure. 'I think you ought to have change of air after your long illness. Is there not a place where the children at the House go to when they have been ill?'

'Oh!' cried the little girl, with eyes as round as her exclamation, 'Nelly Brown went to Margate after the fever. She used to tell us about the sands and the shells, and riding on donkeys; but Nelly had a kind lady who took an interest in her,' said Emmy, her countenance falling, 'and paid for her. There are such a many orphans, sir,' she added, with a wistful look at him. 'Such a many! They would do more for us, if there wasn't such a many of us, Sister Mary Jane says.'

A certain half-aggrieved and serious wonder was in the child's eyes. Why there should be so many orphans puzzled little Emmy; and she felt that it was a special grievance to her, as one of them, debarred from the privileges which a smaller number might have shared.

'And you have a kind gentleman, Emmy,' said Oswald. 'I hope it comes to the same thing. This is what I came to talk to you about——'

'Ah, there she is!' said little Emmy, growing red with delight.

Oswald got up precipitately from his chair. What would she say to find him here already installed before her? She came up, light-footed, in her nun's dress; her face looked

doubly sweet, or so, at least, her young lover thought, in the close circle of the poke-bonnet, to meet the rapture in the child's eyes.

Agnes had no thought that Oswald was likely to penetrate here; therefore, she did not see him or think of him as she came up to the child, and he was a witness of the clinging of the little orphan's arms, the tender sweetness of the salutation. Agnes could not have said anything more homely than the 'How have you been, dear?' but it sounded like the very softest utterance of loving kindness—maternal, dove-like murmurings, tender and caressing, to Oswald's ear.

'Oh, I am well—almost well; and here is the kind gentleman come to see me!' cried little Emmy.

Agnes turned quickly, and looked at him. She thought it was the surgeon, who was young too, and had shown an almost unprofessional eagerness to explain to her all the peculiarities of this interesting case. When she saw who it really was she turned crimson, gave him a look which was half reproach and half satisfaction, and went away to the other side of the sofa, keeping the little patient between them. This suited both parties very well; for while Agnes felt it at once a demonstration of displeasure and flight out of a dangerous vicinity, it brought her face to face with him, and gave him a favourable point of view for all her changes of countenance. And who could object to his visit here, which charity—only charity—could have brought about? By little Emmy's sofa, Oswald felt brave enough to defy all the Sisters in the world.

'I came to inquire into Emmy's prospects of convalescence,' said Oswald, insinuatingly; 'and she tells me there is some place in Margate where children are sent to from the House. If the Sisters will let me pay for the child—she wants sea breezes, I think,' and he looked at her in a serious parental way, 'before she can be fit for work again.'

'Oh, I think they will be very glad!' said Agnes, somewhat breathless. She did not want him to know that she had as much as remarked his absence; and yet, in spite of herself, there was a slight tone of coldness and offence in her voice.

'May I ask you to arrange it for me? I don't know when she will be able to be moved; but when she is—summer is coming on, and the weather is quite genial already.' (The weather is quite genial generally, one time or other, in April, to take the unwary in.)

'Oh, yes,' said Agnes again, assenting out of sheer timidity and embarrassment. Then she said, hesitating a little, 'Perhaps it would be better to send word to the Sister Superior yourself.'

'Is it necessary? I have been in great trouble lately, which is why I could not ask for poor Emmy last week,' he said; and so managed as that the deep hatband should catch the eye of Agnes. Her face softened at once, as he saw, and her eyes, after a momentary glance at the hatband, returned inquiring and kind, not furtive or offended, to his face.

'I am very sorry,' she said, looking again at the hat, and in an eager, half-apologetic tone. 'I will speak of it, if you wish. It is very kind of you to think of her—very kind.'

'Kind! How can I be sufficiently grateful to Emmy?' he said, low and quickly, in a tone which the child could not hear; and then he took the little girl's thin small hand into his, and folded the fingers on a gold coin.

'This is to hire donkeys on the sands, Emmy,' he said; 'but mind you must tell me all about it when you come back.'

'Oh, sir! Oh, Miss Burchell! look what he has given me,' said the child in ecstasy. But Oswald knew how to beat a retreat gracefully. He gave a little squeeze to Emmy's fist, keeping it closed over the sovereign, and, bowing to Agnes, went away.

Was that the last of him? Better, far better, that it should be the last of him, poor Agnes felt, as her heart contracted, in spite of herself, at his withdrawal; but the surprise, and that pang of disappointment, which she would have gone to the stake rather than acknowledge, made her incapable of speech for the moment. It is very wicked and wrong to speak to a gentleman to whom you have never been introduced; but, then, when that gentleman has a legitimate opportunity of making a little acquaintance in a natural way, how strange, and rather injurious, that he should not take advantage of it! This failure of all necessity for resistance at the moment when she was buckling on her best armour to resist, gave an extraordinary twist to Agnes Burchell's heart. It almost would have brought the tears to her eyes, had not she started in instant self-despair—though she would not have shed such tears for all the treasures of the world.

'Oh, look what he has given me!' cried little Emmy, 'a sovereign, a whole sovereign—all to myself!'

'He is—very kind,' said Agnes, stiffly, and she was restrained even in her intercourse with Emmy, not saying half so much to her as she did on ordinary occasions, which was wrong; for, in fact, Emmy could not justly bear blame for anything committed, neither for his coming nor his going away. The child was quite cast down by Miss Burchell's coldness. She began to inquire if Agnes was ill, if she was tired, if she thought the Sisters would object to let her go to Margate; thus plainly showing that she perceived her visitor's abstraction, which was, of all things in the world, the last thing which Agnes wished to be remarked. And poor Agnes could not conceal how worried she was by these questions; she could not account for the discouragement, the sickness of heart, that had come over her. She was tired all at once—overcome by the heat or the cold; which was it?

'It is the spring, miss,' said the nurse.

And she was very willing to allow that it must be the spring.

'I will send you word as soon as I have spoken to the Sister,' she said, kissing little Emmy as she went away; 'and forgive me, dear—for I have a headache. I have not been able to talk to you to-day.'

'Oh, have you a headache?' cried poor little Emmy, ready to cry for sympathy. What perverse things hearts are when they are young! Agnes walked away through the wards the emblem of peaceful quiet, in her black bonnet, her soft face breathing serenity and ease, as one sufferer and another thought as she passed, but under that conventual drapery a hundred thoughts rustling and stinging, so that the girl was afraid lest they should be heard. Oh, she was glad that he was gone! Glad to be spared the struggle and the necessity for telling him that he must haunt her steps no more. Glad to be let alone, to do her work in peace; her work, that was what she lived for, not absurd romances which she was ashamed even to dream of. Her mind was brimful and running over with these thoughts. It was like carrying a hive full of bees, or a cage full of birds through the place, to walk through it like this, her heart beating, and so many voices whispering in her ears. But suddenly, all at once, as she came out of the great doors, they all hushed in a moment. Her heart stopped (she thought); her thoughts fled like frightened children. She was stilled. Why? It was all for:

no better reason than that Oswald Meredith was visible at the gate, in his black clothes, looking (the hospital nurses thought) like an interesting young widower, bereaved and pensive, yet not inconsolable. He had put on a look in conformity with his hatband, and stood there waiting for her as she came out, claiming her sympathy. Agnes grew still in a moment, the tumult and the commotion ceasing in her mind as by magic. She tried to look as if she did not see him, and then to pass him when she got out beyond the gate; but he stepped forward quickly into her path.

‘May I ask if you will speak for me about little Emmy?’ he said. ‘The child looks weak and rather excitable. I should like, if the authorities will permit me, to pay her expenses to the sea.’

‘Oh, yes, they will permit you,’ said Agnes, smiling in spite of all her terrors. ‘You are very kind. I will speak—if you wish it.’

‘And write to me,’ said Oswald, eagerly. ‘It will be necessary to write to me to let me know.’

But Agnes demurred to this easy settlement of the matter. ‘Sister Mary Jane will write. She manages these things herself. But she will be pleased. Good morning,’ she said, making an attempt to quicken her steps.

‘I am going this way,’ said Oswald. ‘I could not come last week. We had bad news.’

She looked up at him, half alarmed, half sympathetic. She was sorry, very sorry, that he should suffer. It was not possible (she thought) to be like the priest and the Levite, pass on on the other side, and pretend to care nothing for one’s neighbour. But then she ought to tell him to go away. So Agnes compounded with her conscience by uttering nothing; all she did was to look up at him with tender brown eyes, so full of pity and interest, that words would have been vain to express all they were able to say.

‘My father is dead in India,’ said Oswald. ‘You may fancy how hard it is upon us to hear of it without any details, without knowing who was with him, or if he was properly cared for. I have not had time for anything since but to attend upon my mother, and see to what had to be done.’

He felt that this was a quite correct description; for had he not sacrificed the last hospital day to the shock of the news, if not to the service of his mother; and there had

been things to do, hatbands, &c., which had kept him occupied.

'I am very sorry,' said Agnes, with downcast eyes.

'You who are so tender and sympathetic, I knew you would feel for—my mother,' said Oswald; upon which name the girl looked up at him again. To feel for his mother—surely there could not be anything more natural, more right, than this.

'You would like my mother—everyone does. It is amusing the way in which people run after her. Not that there is any room for amusement in our mournful house at present,' said Oswald, correcting himself. 'This is the first day the sun has seemed to shine or the skies to be blue since I saw you last.'

'I am very sorry,' said Agnes again; and then, after a pause, she added nervously, 'It is not that I think anything—and, oh, I hope you will not be vexed now that you are in trouble!—but you must not come with me. The Sister thinks it is not right, and neither do I.'

'Not right!' said Oswald, with an ingenuous look of surprise.

Agnes was driven to her wit's end. 'I do not want to seem absurd,' she said, trembling, 'and indeed there is no need for explanation. Please, you must not wait for me at the hospital, or walk back with me any more.'

'Alas! have we not been planning to send little Emmy away? That means that I shall not have the chance, and that the brightest chapter in my life is almost over. Must it be over? You don't know what it has been to me. You have made me think as I never thought before. Will you abandon me now, just when I feel on the threshold of something better?'

'You must not talk so,' said Agnes, roused to something like anger. 'You know very well that, meeting me as you have done, it is wrong; it is not the part of a gentleman to talk so.'

'Is it not the part of a gentleman to admire, to reverence—to love?' Oswald said the last words almost under his breath, and yet she heard them, notwithstanding the noises in the street.

'Mr. Meredith!' She gave him an indignant look, but it ended in a blush, which ran like a warm suffusion all over her, and checked further words on her lips.

'I know your name, too,' he said. 'And it is not love

only, but reverence, that is in my heart! Oh, Agnes! don't turn me away! May not my mother come, when she is well enough to go anywhere, and plead my cause? She might speak if I may not.'

'Oh, go away, please, go away,' said Agnes, in distress. 'We are almost at the House again.'

'And why should not we be at the House, if you will let me hope?' cried Oswald. 'I don't want to skulk away! Yes, I will go and hide myself somewhere if you will not hear me. I shall not care what becomes of me. But Agnes—'

'Oh, Mr. Meredith! Go, please. I cannot think it is right. I—don't understand you. I ought not to listen to you—in this dress; and I have only begun the work.'

'There are other kinds of work. There is the natural work. Is not a wife better than a sister?'

Agnes lighted up with the sudden flash which was characteristic of her. She raised her eyes to him glowing with indignant fire, her face suffused with colour. 'Better?' she said; 'better to live for one's self and one other than for the poor and helpless and the miserable! Oh! do you know what you say? You are a tempter; you are not a true Christian! Better! when there are so many who are wretched and friendless in the world, with no one to care whether they live or die? Do you think a woman does better who tries to make *you* happy than one who gives herself up for *them*?'

In the heat of this sudden burst of controversial eloquence, she turned aside into another street, which led out of the way of the House. Nothing else would have tempted her to such a curious breach of decorum; but the argument did, which filled her with indignant fervour. She did it only half consciously, by impulse, burning to know what he would answer, what plea he could bring up against her. But here Oswald's cleverness failed him. He was not wise enough to see that a little argument would have led her on to any self-committal. He answered softly, with mistaken submission.

'I will retract. I will say anything you please. No, not better; only happier. You would make me the most blessed of men; and what can you do for the poor? So little; everybody says, so little! But for me there would be no limit to what you could do. I have the most need of conversion. Ah! let your mission be me!'

Agnes started and came to herself. She looked round

her, alarmed and scared, when she knew, yet only half knew, that she had left the direct road. 'I have taken the wrong turn,' she said, with confusion. 'Mr. Meredith, let us forget that we have ever met. How could I turn back, having just put my hand to the plough? Oh, it is very weak and wicked of me, but I do not want the Sister to see you. She will think—but you have been kind, and I will say good-by here.'

'Do you want to say good-by? Why should we forget we have ever met? Tell me to forget that I am born!'

'Oh, no, no; it is not like that. Mr. Meredith, we have only known each other four or five—a few weeks.'

'Six—I have kept closer count than you.'

'And what does that matter in a life?' said Agnes, looking up at him with a courageous smile. 'Nothing! no more than a moment. We have not done any harm,' she added, collecting all her strength. 'We have not neglected our work nor wasted our time. And we never meant anything. It was all an accident. Mr. Meredith, good-by. I shall pray that you may be happy.'

'Ah! that is like what the world says of saints,' he said, sharply. 'You make me wretched, and then pray that I may be happy.'

'Oh, no, no,' she cried, the tears coming to her eyes. 'How can I have made you wretched? It was only an accident. It has been only a moment. You will not refuse to say good-by.'

Foolish Agnes! she had nothing to do but to leave him, having said her say. But, instead of this she argued, bent upon making a logical conclusion to which he should consent, convinced, though against his will. On the whole she preferred that it should be against his will—but convinced she had determined that he must be. They walked away softly through the little street into the sunset, which sank lower every moment, shedding a glory of slant light upon the two young figures so sombre in garb, so radiant in life. Where they were going they did not know, nor how the charmed moments were passing. Every shade of the coming evening lay behind them, but all the glory of the rose tints and glowing purple, the daffodil skies and gates of pearl, before.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WIDOW.

THE full particulars of Mr. Meredith's death and Mr. Meredith's will came by the next mail; and this information acted as a kind of funeral ceremony and conclusion to the melancholy period. All his affairs were in order; his will unassailable, the provisions sufficiently just. There was more money than anyone expected, and it was divided into three unequal shares—the largest for his eldest son, the second for Edward, the least of all for their mother. This arrangement took them all by surprise, and it was with some little difficulty that Mrs. Meredith was brought to see how it affected herself. That there would be any difference to her had not occurred to her. She had thought only of her children. 'They certainly will not be worse off than they have been,' she said five minutes before the contents of the will were communicated to her; but any question as to how she herself would be affected had not entered her mind. Even after she had heard it she did not realise it.

'I am afraid you will scarcely be able to keep up this house unless the boys stay with you, which is not to be expected,' said old Mr. Sommerville.

She looked at him, taking her handkerchief from her eyes. 'My house?' she said, faltering. Mr. Beresford was present and one or two other old friends.

Oswald was playing with a paperknife, balancing it on his finger, and paying no attention. He was thinking of something else with a vague smile on his face. He was as rich almost as he had hoped—made an 'eldest son' of, in so far at least that his portion was the biggest; and he was thinking of a house of his own, taking no thought for his mother, and a wife of his own soon to be beguiled out of poke-bonnets and convent cloaks, yet all the more piquant from the comparison. Naturally this was more interesting to him than his mother, and the house that he had been used to for years. But Edward, who, whatever he was himself doing, managed somehow to see what Oswald was about, and who thought he knew what that preoccupation and absorption meant, interposed

hastily. 'Of course my mother will keep her house. It is quite unnecessary to enter into such questions. The economy of the household is unchanged,' he said.

'But, my lad, I don't agree with you,' said old Sommersville. 'You may both take to chambers, your brother and you. Most young men do now-a-days, so far as I can see. I will not say whether it's better for them, or worse for them. Anyhow, your mother must be on her own footing. You must not be dependent on the whimsies of a boy. I would advise you, my dear madam, to look out for a smaller house.'

'A smaller house?' she repeated again, in dismay. 'Why a smaller house?' Then her eyes fell upon Oswald. 'Yes, I understand. Oswald will perhaps—marry. It is quite true; but I have lived in this house so long—I am used to it. I do not wish to change.'

'You will not be able to afford it—on your income, madam,' said old Sommersville, watching her keenly. He was fond of studying mankind, and to see how a fellow-creature encountered a change of fortune was keenly interesting to the old man.

She looked at him, opening her eyes wider with a curious gaze of surprise; then paused a moment, looking round her as if for some explanation. 'Ah,' she said, 'I begin to understand.' Nobody spoke to her; the other two old friends who were present turned aside and talked to each other. Mr. Beresford looked over a photograph book as earnestly as if he hoped to find a fortune between the pages; only the old spy watched the new-made widow, the admired and beloved woman to whom in this distinct way it was becoming apparent that she had not been so much beloved after all.

And her face was worth a little study—there came over it a momentary gloom. She had been thinking with so much tender kindness of *him*; but he, it was evident, had been less tender in his thoughts of her. But then, he had died, and she lived. No doubt, if it had been she who had died, his mind too would have been softened, and his heart grown tender. The cloud lightened, a soft smile came into her eyes; and then two tears sprang quickly over the smile, because he had slighted her publicly in these last settlements; he had put her down willingly and consciously out of the position she had held as his wife. She felt this sting, for love and honour were the things she prized most. Then her courageous spirit

roused up, and this time the smile descended softly, seriously, to touch her mouth.

'What does it matter?' she said, with her habitual sweetness. 'My husband knew I had a little of my own. If I am not able to keep up this house, I must get another house, Mr. Sommerville, that I can keep up.'

'Madam,' said Mr. Sommerville, 'that is the way to take it. I respect you for what you say; many a woman now would have raged at us that cannot help it, would have abused the maker of the will, and made a disturbance.'

'Made a disturbance?' said Mrs. Meredith. The smile brightened into a momentary laugh. It was the first time she had allowed herself to stray beyond the gloomy pale of memory which she considered her husband's due. But the sound of her own laugh frightened her. She shrank a little, saying hastily, 'Oh, Edward, my dear boy, forgive me!' He was not her favourite son, or at least he had thought so; but he was the one to whom she clung now.

'I thought you knew my mother,' said Edward, proudly, 'after knowing her so long. That is all; is it not? We can settle among ourselves about houses, &c. I think my mother has had enough of it now.'

'No,' she said, 'oh, no; whatever ought to be done, I am quite able for; if there is any stipulation as to what I must do, or about the boys—if the boys should marry; but to be sure they are of age, they are their own masters,' she added, with once more a faint smile. 'Whether their mother is considered wise enough—oh, Edward! no, I am in earnest. Perhaps there is some task for me, something to do.'

This was the only little resentment she showed; and even the sharp-witted old Sommerville scarcely took it for resentment. The friends took luncheon with the family at an early hour, and departed, carrying away the unnecessary papers, and leaving everything as it had been; the blinds were all drawn up, the sunshine coming in as usual. Oswald, with his hat brushed to a nicety and his cigars in his pocket, went out just as usual. The usual subdued domestic sounds were in the house, and in the course of the afternoon four or five visitors were allowed to come in. Everything was as it had been; only Mrs. Meredith's pretty ribbons, all soft in tint as in texture, her dove-coloured gown, her lace, her Indian shawls and ornaments, were all put away, and crape reigned

supreme. There was no further conversation on the subject until after dinner, when Edward and his mother were alone. Oswald was dining with one of his friends; it was hard to hold him to the etiquette of 'bereavement.' 'Besides,' Mrs. Meredith said, 'no one thinks of these rules with a young man.'

'It will be strange to have to leave this house,' she said, when the servants had left the dining-room. 'It was the first house I had in England, when I brought you home. Some people thought the country would have been best; but I liked the protection of a town, and to see my friends, and to be near a good doctor; for you were delicate, Edward, when you were a child.'

'Who, I, mother? I don't look much like it now.'

'No, heaven be praised—but you were delicate; two little white-faced things you were, with India written in your little pale cheeks. That was the first thing that brought me home. You could not have stayed in India; and then the question was, Edward, to leave your father, or to leave you—and, oh—you seemed to have so much more need of me!'

'Do not go over the question again, mother. You did not do it, I am sure, without thought. Let us think of the future now. You are to stay in the house you like, and which is all the home I have ever known; as for a smaller house, or for what you are able to afford, that is simple nonsense. It appears I have a separate income now, not merely an allowance. You don't mean to turn me out, do you, to the streets?'

'My dear boy!—of course, wherever I have a roof, there is a place for you.'

'Very well, mother; this is the place. You don't want me to go off and live in chambers?'

'Not unless—you think it necessary; unless—you would like it better, Edward. Oh, I hope not, my dear!'

'So do I,' he said, smiling. 'I hope you don't mean to turn me out for the sake of something you can afford. We must live together, mother, you and I. I can't be idle; you know, I must do something; and all the pleasure I shall ever get out of life,' he added, with the solemnity of youthful conviction, 'will be to find my home always the same—and my mother. I look for no other happiness.'

'My dear,' she said, 'that is all very well at present, till

you see someone who is dearer to you than either your mother or your home. That will come some time; but in the meantime, dear ——,

‘The meantime will be always, mother—the other time will never come.’

Mrs. Meredith gave him a sudden look—then checked herself when about to say something, sighed a little, and made a pause; and then she began to talk on another subject between which and this there seemed little connection, though Edward perceived the connection easily enough.

‘We shall have it all to ourselves apparently,’ she said, with a faint smile. ‘Oswald, I suppose, will be thinking of a house for himself; and why should he wait? There is no reason why he should wait. To be sure, they are young. Has he said anything to you, Edward?’

‘Nothing, mother.’

‘Well; they must have their reasons, I presume. One does not like to be left quite out; but it is the thing one ought to expect as one gets old. Old people are supposed not to sympathise with youth. It is a mistake, Edward—a great pity; but I suppose it will be the same as long as the world lasts. I did the same, no doubt, when I was young too.’

He made no reply. So sure as he was that he never could have such secrets to communicate, how could he say anything? and she went on.

‘I am not finding fault with Oswald. He has always been a good boy—both of you,’ she said, smiling upon him. ‘You have never given me any great anxiety. And everything has turned out well hitherto. They will have plenty of money; but so long as Oswald does not say anything, how can I speak to her father, as I should like to do? Men do not notice such things; and it seems uncandid with so good a friend; but till Oswald speaks—I hope he will be an attentive husband, Edward. He will be kind; but there are many little attentions that a fanciful girl expects—and feels the want of when they fail her.’

Edward said nothing to all this; how could he? He winced, but bore it stoutly, though he could not make any reply. It was better to accustom himself to have it talked about; but he could not himself enter upon the subject. ‘Will you mind if I leave this evening, for a little?’ he said.

‘No, dear; certainly not—but, Edward,’ she said, coming

round to him as she rose from the table, and laying her hand on his arm, 'are you sure it is good for you, my dear boy? are you not making it harder for yourself?'

'Let me alone, mother—so long as I can,' he said, hoarsely. 'No; it does not make it harder; and it can't last long now.'

'No—there is no reason why they should wait. I wish—I wish he may not be a careless husband, Edward. Why should he spend all his evenings away? There is something in it I cannot understand.'

'He has always been the happy one, mother. Whatever he has wished for has come to him. He does not know what it is to be so fortunate—nothing has cost him any trouble—not even this.'

'Still, he should not be away every evening,' said the mother, shaking her head; and she drew him down to her and kissed his cheek tenderly. '*My* boy! we must comfort each other,' she said, with soft tears in her eyes. Her heart bled for him in the troubles she divined, and she was one of the women who never lose their interest in the trials of youthful love. Yet, sympathetic as she was, she smiled too as she went upstairs. He thought this would last for ever—that he would never change his mind, nor suffer a new affection to steal into his heart. She smiled a little, and shook her head all by herself. How short-lived were their nevers and for evers! She went up to the drawing-room, where she had spent so many quiet evenings, pleased to think that her boys were happy, though they were not with her; where she had thought of them at school, at college, in all the different places they had passed through, trying to follow them in her thoughts, anxiously wondering what they were doing, often pausing to breathe out a brief, silent prayer for them in the midst of her knitting, or when she closed her book for a moment. This had become so habitual to her, that she would do it almost without thinking. 'Oh, bless my boys; keep them from evil!'—between how many sentences of how many books—in the pauses of how many conversations—woven through and through how many pieces of wool, had those simple supplications gone!

By-and-by she heard the door close of the next house, the bell ring in her own, the familiar step on the stair, and the neighbour came in and took his usual place. They sat on each side of the fireplace, in which still glimmered a little

fire, though the season was warm. It irked her that she could not continue with him the conversation; she had been having with Edward; but till Oswald spoke what could she say? and they had plenty to talk about.

'I wonder,' he said, 'if it was a bad dream when I was sent away—not knowing why, or where to go?'

'Where were you going? I never wished it. How I should have missed you now! It is in trouble that we want our friends most. Edward has been so good and kind. He says he will never leave me; that we must live together. And he thinks he will always think so—poor boy! I have not the heart to tell him that he will soon change.'

'Why should he change? He may search far enough before he will find such another home. If I were he, I would not change either. He is more to be trusted than Oswald.'

'Oh, you are mistaken. My boy is ——'

'I am not saying ill of him. If I ever wish to do that, I will not come to his mother with it. But Oswald thinks more of himself. Where is he to-night? He has left you alone, to bear all your loneliness, to think over everything.'

'You know I never taught my children that they were to keep by me. I might have liked it, but I did not think it right. They are very, very good; but no one can upbraid me with keeping them at my apron-strings.'

'That is one thing I object to in women,' said Mr. Beresford. 'The most sensible are so sensitive about those wretched little things that people say. What does it matter what people say who know nothing? Do you think a club is so much better than your apron-strings, as you call them? Why should you care for such vulgar reproach?'

'I don't know why; we are made so, I suppose; and it women are sensitive, you must know the best of men will talk about our apron-strings; when all we are thinking of is what is best for the children—trembling, perhaps, and wondering what is best—giving all our hearts to it—some careless fool will spoil all we are planning with his old joke about our apron-strings—or some wise man will do it. It is all the same. But, never mind; I have locked up all my tremblings in my own mind, and left them free.'

'And you have not repented? You have more confidence in them now than if you had been less brave. But I wish Oswald had stayed at home with you to-night.'

'Oh, you must not blame Oswald,' she cried, doubly anxious not to have her son blamed, and not to allow Cara's father to conceive any prejudice against him. 'It is in the evening he sees his friends; he is always ready when I want him—during the day. It would not be good for the boy to let him shut himself up. Indeed, it is my own doing,' said Mrs. Meredith, smiling upon him, with one of those serene and confident lies which the sternest moralist cannot condemn.

Mr. Beresford shook his head a little; but he could not undeceive the mother about her son, any more than she could confess how well she was aware of all Oswald's selfishnesses. They were selfishnesses, to be sure; or, at least, the outside world would naturally call them so. To her the boy's conduct bore a different appearance. He thought of himself—this was how she explained it. And how natural that was for anyone so watched over and cared for as he had been! Was it not, indeed, her fault, who had always supplied every want, satisfied every wish she knew of, and trained him, so to speak, to have everything his own way, and to think that every other way should yield to his? It was *her* fault; and as he grew older, and his mind enlarged, he would grow out of it. This, though with an uneasy twinge now and then, Mrs. Meredith believed, and though as clear-sighted as anyone to her boy's faults, thought less hardly, and perhaps more truly, of them than strangers did. But there was a little pause after this, and a sense in her mind that she had not convinced this critic, who considered himself more clear-sighted than Oswald's mother, and internally half pitied, had smiled at her blindness. If critics in general only knew! for who is so sharp-sighted to all these imperfections as the parent who thus endeavours to convince them of the excellence of a child!

'Edward gives up India, then!' said Mr. Beresford. 'I do not wonder; but it is a fine career, and with his connections and antecedents——'

Mrs. Meredith gave a little shiver. 'Do you think he should still go?' she asked, anxiously. 'Indeed, I have not persuaded him. I have held my tongue. And he never liked the idea. He did it for duty only. But he does not mean to sink into idleness—he will work here.'

'At what will he work? The Bar? Every young man I ever meet is going to the Bar. There will soon be nobody left to make the necessary mischief, and provide work for

them. But if a man wants a fine career, India is the place. You are going to stay in this house, notwithstanding your old adviser?’

‘It does not matter to me,’ she said. ‘I can be as happy in one house as another. It is Edward who wishes it.’

‘And then, if he sees someone he likes—and marries, and leaves you in the lurch? Boys who are independent so young are sure to marry young.’

She shook her head. ‘Ah! how I wish it might be so! I would forgive him for leaving me—if only my boy was happy.’

Mr. Beresford got up, and walked about the room. It was nothing extraordinary, but only a way he had, and did not suggest to his friend any *accès* of excitement.

‘You think marriage, then, so much the happiest condition?’ he said.

Mrs. Meredith made a pause before she replied. ‘Is that the question? How can I answer at my age, and in—the circumstances you know. We have not to settle abstract happiness. Feelings of that kind die out, and I am not the person to speak. I think a woman—at one time of life—loves her children more than ever she loved *man*.’

‘Some women——’

‘But it is not marrying in the abstract. My boy would be happy if he could get—what he wants. But he never will get that,’ she added, with a sigh.

‘What is so tragic about Edward’s love affairs?’ he asked, half laughing; ‘is it ever so serious at two-and-twenty?’

‘Ah, you laugh! but you would not have laughed, at his age, if you had seen someone you were fond of secured by—another—who was not half so true a lover perhaps; or, at least, you thought so.’

‘No,’ he said, growing grave. ‘That was different, certainly.’ And the mind of the man travelled suddenly off, like a flash of lightning, back to the flowery land of youth, that lay so far behind. The mind of the woman took no such journey. Her love had ended, not in the anguish of a death parting, but in estrangement, and coldness, and indifference. She remained where she was, thinking only, with a sigh, how willingly she would give a bit of her life, if she could—a bit of her very heart—to get happiness for her boy; yet believing that to make one happy would be to ruin the other,

and standing helpless between the two. This was the only complication in her mind. But in this the complications were many. Why did she say this, and send him back to the days of young romance and passion? just when his mind was full of the calmer affections and expedients of middle age, and the question whether—to secure such a tender companion as herself, whom he loved in a way, and whose absence impoverished life beyond bearing—he should endeavour to return into the traditions of the other love which was past for him as for her. Was it her friendly, gentle hand, so unconscious of what he was meditating, that put him thus back at a touch into the old enchanted world, and showed him so plainly the angel at the gates of that faded, unfading Paradise; an angel, not with any flaming sword, but with the stronger bar of soft uplifted hands! Impossible! So it was—and yet what else could be?

CHAPTER XXXV.

ROGER'S FATE.

ROGER BURCHELL had made two unsuccessful visits to the Square—the first absolutely painful, the second disappointing. On both occasions he had failed to see Cara, except surrounded by strangers, who were nothing, and indeed less than nothing to him; and both times he had gone away resolute that nothing should induce him to tempt fate again, and come back. But a young man who is in love persuades himself with difficulty that fate is against him. It seems so unlikely and incredible that such a thing should be; and short of a distinct and unmistakable sentence, hope revives after the shock of a mere repulse has a little worn off. And then Roger had heard that Cara was coming back to the Hill, and his heart had risen. When she was there again, within his reach, without 'these fellows' by, who had troubled him, Cara, he flattered himself, would be to him as she used to be; and, distance lending enchantment to his vision, it appeared to him that she had been much kinder in those days than she ever really was, and that she must have understood him, and had seriously inclined to hear what he had to say. Soon he

managed to persuade himself that Cara had never been cold; never had been anything but sweet and encouraging, and that it was only her surroundings which had led her far away from him, and forced the attention which she would have much more willingly bestowed upon himself, the companion of her youth. This idea brought a rush of tender feeling with it, and resolution not to be discouraged—never to take an answer again but from Cara herself. How likely that she might have wondered too why he did not take the initiative, why he did not insist upon speaking to her, and getting her own plain answer! From this to the thought that Cara was looking out for him every Sunday—wondering, disappointed, and alarmed that he did not come—was but a step; and then Roger made up his mind to go again, to insist on seeing her, and to *ask her*—simply to ask her, neither more nor less—for there was very little time to lose. In the autumn he was going to India; already his importance had risen with all belonging to him. Up to this moment he had been only one of the boys, more or less, wasting money, and limiting the advantages of the others; but in autumn he would have an income of his own, and would be independent. The sense of importance went to his head a little. Had he met the Queen, I think that he would have expected her Majesty to know that he was going out to India in October. It was not that he was vain of himself or his prospects; but a man *with an income* is very different from a man without that possession. This is a fact which no one can doubt. It was late in April when he came to the Square for the third time, and so fine a day that everybody had gone out, except Cara, who was not well. When he was ushered into the drawing-room, he found her seated in an easy chair, with a shawl round her. Though it was very sunshiny outside, it was rather cold indoors. Miss Cherry, who stood by with her bonnet on, and her prayer-book in her hand, had just ordered the fire to be lighted, and Cara, with her cold, had crept close to it. Miss Cherry was going to the afternoon service.

‘I shall not be long, my darling. You will not miss me,’ she was saying, ‘though I don’t like to leave you on my last day.’

‘Don’t say it is the last day—and look, here is Roger to keep me company,’ said Cara. ‘He will sit with me while you are away.’

How glad he was, and how eager to promise !

Miss Cherry thought no more of poor Roger than if he had been a cabbage. She thought it might be an amusement to her niece to hear his little gossip about home; and though she saw through his eagerness, and suspected his object, yet she was not alarmed for Cara. Poor blind moth, coming to scorch his wings, she said to herself, with a half-amused pity. She did not pay very much attention to what he might have to suffer. Indeed, unless one has a special interest in the sufferer, such pangs always awake more or less amusement in the mature bosom; and, tender-hearted as Miss Cherry was, her mind was too full of other things to have much leisure for Roger, who was, she thought, anyhow too shy and awkward to commit himself. She had her mind full of a great many things. She was going away, now that her brother was not going. But though she was anxious about her old aunt, and her home, which she had left for so long a period, she was anxious about Cara too, and did not know which of these opposing sentiments dragged her most strongly to one side or the other. And then she was angry with her brother—angry with him for staying, and angry that there had been an occasion for his going away. She went to afternoon church at that drowsiest hour, when, if the mind has any temptation to be dejected, or to be cross, it is crosser and more downcast than at any other moment, and attended a sleepy service in an old dingy chapel, one of the few which are still to be found remaining, in which a scattered congregation drowse in big pews, and something like a clerk still conducts the responses. Miss Cherry had been used to this kind of service all her life, and in her gentle obstinacy of conservatism clung to it, though it possessed very few attractions. She said her own prayers very devoutly, and did her best to join in the irregular chorus of the clerk; and she sat very erect in the high corner of the pew, and gave an undivided attention to the sermon, sternly commanding every stray thought out of the way. But the effort was not so successful as the valour of the endeavour merited. Miss Cherry did not like, as she said, to have the good effect all dissipated by worldly talk after a good sermon (and was not every sermon good in intention at least—calculated, if we would only receive its directions, to do good to the very best of us?); and for this reason she was in the habit of avoiding all conversation on her

way from church. But her resolution could not stand when she saw Mr. Maxwell coming towards her from the other side of the street. He had not been at church, she feared; but yet she had a great many things to ask him. She let him join her, though she liked to have her Sundays to herself.

‘Yes, I hope Miss Charity is better,’ he said. ‘Her energy has come back to her, and if the summer would really come—— I hear of another change, which I can’t say surprises me, but yet—your brother then is not going away?’

‘No—why should he?’ said Miss Cherry. It is one thing to find fault with one’s brother, and quite another thing to hear him criticised by his friend.

‘I thought so,’ said Maxwell; ‘he has no stamina, no firmness. I suppose, then, he has made up his mind?’

‘To what, Mr. Maxwell? He has made up his mind not to go away.’

‘And to all the consequences. Miss Cherry, you are not so simple as you wish people to think. He means, of course, to marry again. I had hoped he would have more sense—and better feeling.’

‘I don’t know why you should judge James so harshly,’ said Miss Cherry, with spirit. ‘Many people marry twice, of whom nothing is said—and when they do not, perhaps it is scarcely from good taste or feeling on their part.’

‘You are kind,’ said the doctor, growing red, and wondering within himself how the d—— could she know what he had been thinking of? Or was it merely a bow drawn at a venture, though the arrow whistled so close?

‘Whatever wishes I might have,’ he added, betraying himself, ‘are nothing to the purpose. Your brother is in a very different position. He has a pretty, sweet daughter, grown up, at a companionable age, to make a home for him. What would he have? Such a man might certainly be content—instead of compelling people to rake up the past, and ask unpleasant questions.’

‘Questions about James? I don’t know what questions anyone could ask about my brother——’

‘Well,’ said Maxwell, somewhat hotly; ‘I don’t like doing anything in the dark, and you may tell Beresford, if you like, Miss Cherry, all that I have to say, that I shall oppose it. I shall certainly oppose it. Never should I have said a word,

had he let things alone; but in this case, it will become my duty.'

'What will become your duty?' said Miss Cherry, aghast.

He looked at her wondering face, and his own countenance changed. 'It is not anything to bother you about,' he said. 'It is—a nothing—a matter between your brother and me.'

'What is it?' she said, growing anxious.

He had turned with her, and walked by her side in his vehemence. Now that she had taken fright, he stopped short.

'It is only that I have a patient to see,' he said; 'and I am glad to be able to make your mind quite easy about Miss Beresford. She is twice as strong as either you or I.'

And before she could say another word he had knocked at a door they were passing, and left her, taking off his hat in the most ordinary way. What did he mean? or was it nothing—some trifling quarrel he had got into with James? Miss Cherry walked the rest of the way home, alone indeed and undisturbed, but with a strange commotion in her mind. Was there something serious behind these vague threatenings, or was he only depressed and cross, like herself, from the troublesome influence of spring, and of this east-windy day?

Meanwhile, Roger sat down in front of Cara's fire, which was too warm, and made him uncomfortable—for he had been walking quickly, and he had no cold. He thought she looked pale, as she reclined in the big chair, with that fleecy white shawl round her, and he told her so frankly.

'It is living in town that has done it,' he said. 'When you come back to the country you will soon be all right.'

'It is only a cold,' said Cara. 'I don't know now when we shall go to the country. Aunt Cherry leaves us to-morrow.'

'But you are coming too? Yes, you are! Miss Charity told my mother so. In a few days——'

'Ah, that was before papa changed his plans; he is not going abroad now—so I stay at home,' said Cara.

The young man started up from his seat in the sudden sting of his disappointment. He was too unsophisticated to be able to control his feelings. Still, he managed not to swear or rave, as Nature suggested. 'Good Heavens!' was the only audible exclamation he permitted himself, which, to be sure, is merely a pious ejaculation; though a lower 'Confound!' came under his breath—but this Cara was not supposed to hear.

‘Home?’ he said, coming back after a walk to the window, when he had partially subdued himself. ‘I should have thought the Hill, where you have lived all your life, and where everybody cares for you, would have seemed more like *home* than the Square.’

‘Do not be cross, Roger,’ said Cara. ‘Why should you be cross?’ Something of the ease of conscious domination was in her treatment of him. She did not take the same high ground with Oswald or Edward; but this poor boy was, so to speak, under her thumb, and, like most superior persons, she made an unkind use of her power, and treated her slave with levity. ‘You look as if you meant to scold me. There is a little red here,’ and she put up her hand to her own delicate cheek, to show the spot, ‘which means temper, and it is not nice to show temper, Roger, especially with an old friend. I did not choose my home any more than my name. You might as well say you should have thought I would prefer to be May, rather than Cara.’

‘It is you who are unkind,’ said the poor young fellow. ‘Oh, Cara, if you remember how we have played together; how long you have known me! and this is my last summer in England. In six months—less than six months—I shall be gone.’

‘I am very sorry,’ she said. ‘But why should you get up and stamp about? That will not make things any better. Sit down and tell me about it. Poor Roger! are you really going away?’

Now, this was not the tone he wished or expected; for he was far from feeling himself to be poor Roger, because he was going away. Offended dignity strove with anxious love in his mind, and he felt, with, perhaps, a vulgar yet very reasonable instinct, that his actual dignity and importance made the best foundation for his love.

‘It is not so much to be regretted, Cara, except for one thing. I shall enter upon good pay at once. That is worth sacrificing something for; and I don’t care so much, after all, for just leaving England. What does it matter where a fellow is, so long as he is happy? But it’s about being happy that I want to speak to you.’

‘I think it matters a great deal where one is,’ said Cara; but she refrained, out of politeness to him, who had no choice in the matter, to sing the praises of home. ‘I have been so

used to people wandering about,' she said, apologetically; 'papa, you know; but I am glad that you don't mind; and, of course, to have money of your own will be very pleasant. I am afraid they will all feel it very much at the Rectory.'

'Oh, *they!* they don't care. It will be one out of the way. Ah, Cara, if I only could think *you* would be sorry.'

'Of course I shall be sorry, Roger,' she said, with gentle seriousness. 'There is no one I shall miss so much. I will think of you often in the woods, and when there are garden parties. As you are going, I am almost glad not to be there this year.'

'Ah, Cara! if you would but say a little more, how happy you might make me,' said the young man, self-deceived, with honest moisture in his eyes.

'Then I will say as much more as you like,' she said, bending forward towards him with a little soft colour rising in her cheeks. 'I shall think of you always on Sundays, and how glad we used to be when you came; and if you have time to write to me, I will always answer; and I will think of you at that prayer in the Litany for those who travel by land and water.'

'Something more yet—only one thing more!' cried poor Roger, getting down upon one knee somehow, and laying his hand on the arm of her chair. His eyes were quite full, his young face glowing: 'Say you love me ever so little, Cara! I have never thought of anyone in my life but you. Whenever I hoped or planned anything it was always for you. I never had a penny: I never could show what I felt, anyhow: but now I shall be well enough off, and able to keep——'

'Hush!' said Cara, half frightened; 'don't look so anxious. I never knew you so restless before; one moment starting up and walking about, another down on your knees. Why should you go down on your knees to me? Of course I like you, Roger dear; have we not been like brother and sister?'

'No!' he said; 'and I don't want to be like brother and sister.' 'I am so fond of you, I don't know what to say. Oh, Cara! don't be so quiet as if it didn't matter. I shall be well off, able to keep a wife.'

'A wife?—that is a new idea,' she said, bewildered; 'but you are too young, Roger.'

'Will you come with me, Cara?' he cried, passing over, scarcely hearing, in his emotion, the surprise yet indifference

of this question. 'Oh, Cara! don't say no without thinking! I will wait if you like—say a year or two years. I shall not mind. I would rather wait fifty years for you than have anyone else, Cara. Only say you will come with me, or even to me, and I shall not mind.'

Cara sat quite upright in her chair. She threw her white shawl off in her excitement. '*Me?*' she said; 'me?' (That fine point of grammar often settles itself summarily in excitement, and on the wrong side.) 'You must be dreaming,' she said; 'or am I dreaming, or what has happened? I don't know what you mean.'

He stumbled up to his feet red as the glow of the fire which had scorched him, poor boy, as if his unrequited passion was not enough. 'If I am dreaming!' he said, in the sharp sting of his downfall, 'it is you who have made me dream.'

'I?' said Cara, in her surprise (the grammar coming right as the crisis got over); 'what have I done? I don't understand at all. I am not unkind. If there was anything I could do to please you, I would do it.'

'To please me, Cara?' he cried, sinking again into submission. 'To make me happy, that is what you can do, if you like. Don't say no all at once; think of it at least; the hardest-hearted might do that.'

'I am not hard-hearted,' she said. 'I begin to see what it is. We have both made a mistake, Roger. I never thought *this* was what you were thinking; and you have deceived yourself, supposing I knew. I am very, very sorry. I will do anything—else——'

'I don't want anything else,' he said, sullenly. He turned his back upon her in the gloom and blackness of his disappointment. 'What else is there between young people like us,' he said, bitterly. 'My mother always says so, and she ought to know. I have heard often enough of girls leading men on—enticing them to make fools of themselves—and I see it is true now. But I never thought it of you, Cara. Whatever others did, I thought you were one by yourself, and nobody like you. But I see now you are just like the rest. What good does it do you to make a fellow unhappy—to break his heart?' Here poor Roger's voice faltered, the true feeling in him struggling against the vulgar fibre which extremity revealed. 'And all your smiling and looking sweet, was it all for nothing?' he said—'all meaning nothing!'

You would have done just the same for anybody else! What good does it do you? for there's nobody here to see how you have made a laughing-stock of me.'

'Have I made a laughing-stock of you? I am more ready to cry than to laugh,' said Cara, indignantly, yet with quivering lip.

'I know what you will do,' he said; 'you will tell everybody—that is what you will do. Oh, it's a devilish thing in girls! I suppose they never *feel* themselves, and it pleases their vanity to make fools of us. You will go and tell those fellows, those Merediths, what a laugh you have had out of poor Roger. Poor Roger! but you shan't have your triumph, Miss Beresford,' said the poor lad, snatching up his hat. 'If you won't look at me, there are others who will. I am not so ridiculous as to be beneath the notice of someone else.'

He made a rush to the door, and Cara sat leaning forward a little, looking after him,—her blue eyes wide open, a look of astonishment, mingled with grief, on her face. She felt wounded and startled, but surprised most of all. *Roger!*—was it Roger who spoke so? When he got to the door he turned round and looked back upon her, his lips quivering, his whole frame trembling. Cara could scarcely bear the pitiful, despairing look in the lad's eyes.

'Oh, Roger!' she said; 'don't go away so. You can't imagine I ever laughed at you, or made fun of you—I?—when you were always the kindest friend to me. Won't you say "good-by" to me kindly? But never mind—I shall see you often before you go away.'

And then, while he still stood there irresolute, not knowing whether to dart away in the first wrathful impulse, or to come back and throw himself at her feet, all these possibilities were made an end of in a moment by Miss Cherry, who walked softly up the stairs and came in with her prayer-book still in her hand. Roger let go his hold of the door, which he had been grasping frantically, and smiled with a pale countenance as best he could to meet the new-comer, standing out into the room to let her pass, and doing all he could to look like any gentleman saying 'good-by' at the end of a morning call. Cara drew the shawl again upon her shoulders, and wrapped herself closer and closer in it, as if that was all she was thinking of. If they had not been so elaborate in their precautions they might have deceived Miss Cherry, whose

mind was taken up with her own thoughts. But they played their parts so much too well that her curiosity was aroused at once.

'Are you going, Roger? You must stop first and have some tea. I daresay Cara had not the good sense to offer you some tea; but John will bring it directly when he knows I have come in. Is it really true, my dear Roger, that you are going away? I am sure I wish you may have every advantage and good fortune.'

She looked at him curiously, and he felt that she read him through and through. But he could not make any attempt to make-believe with Miss Cherry, whom he had known ever since he could remember. He muttered something, he could not tell what, made a hurried dash at Cara's hand, which he crushed so that her poor little fingers did not recover for half an hour; and then rushed out of the house. Miss Cherry turned to Cara with inquiring eyes. The girl had dropped back into her chair, and had almost disappeared in the fleecy folds of the shawl.

'What have you been doing to Roger?' she said. 'Poor boy! If I had known I would have warned him. Must there always be some mischief going on whenever there are two together? Oh, child! you ought to have let him see how it was; you should not have led him on!'

'Did I lead him on? What have I done?' He said so too,' cried poor Cara, unable to restrain her tears. She cried so that Miss Cherry was alarmed, and from scolding took to petting her, afraid of the effect she had herself produced.

'It's only a way of speaking,' she said. 'No, my darling, I know you did not. If he said so, he was very unkind. Do not think of it any more.'

But this is always so much easier to say than to do.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BETWEEN THE TWO.

OSWALD'S spirits very soon recovered the shock of his father's death. He was as light-hearted as ever after that day when he had visited little Emmy at the hospital. Perhaps the

satisfaction of having done a good action was in his mind, for he was permitted to send Emmy to the seaside to the abode of another sisterhood there. Agnes undertook after all to make the proposal for him, which was graciously accepted, though she herself received another admonition from the Superior. Sister Mary Jane appointed a meeting with the other culprit who had made this charitable offer. As usual, he was not supposed to be at all in fault. He was allowed to enter the sacred convent gates, and wait in St. Elizabeth (for so the Superior's room was entitled) till Sister Mary Jane made her appearance, who made all the arrangements, and took his money with much gracious condescension, but said nothing about his ambassadress. Neither did he say anything, though he looked up eagerly every time the door opened, and made furtive investigations, as well as he could, through the long bare passages, where all sorts of instruction were going on. When he opened (as he had no right to do) one of the doors he passed, he found it to be full of infants, who turned round *en masse* to his great terror, and saluted him with a simultaneous bob. They knew their manners if he did not. But nowhere could he see Agnes, and not a word about her did these unfeeling Sisters utter. To tell truth, they both waited for each other. Sister Mary Jane had little doubt that his real mission at the 'House' was to find out all he could from her, whereas he on his part had a lively anticipation of being called to task for following and talking to the governess. Oswald had something of the feeling of a schoolboy who has escaped when he found that no explanation was asked from him, and this was the only reason he gave to himself for not making those inquiries into Agnes Burchell's family which he felt it was now really necessary to make. But why immediately? Let him make a little more ground with her first, and establish his own position. It charmed him a great deal more to think of winning her in this irregular way than to plan the proper formal approach to her parents, and application for their consent. To go and hunt up an unknown family and introduce himself to them in cold blood, and ask them, 'Will you give me your daughter?' was quite alarming to him. He put it off, as it is so easy to do. Certainly it would be his duty to do it, one time or other, if his suit prospered, and he was not much afraid of the non-success of his suit. But to go to

them once for all, and inform them of his engagement with their daughter, would, he thought, be a less difficult matter—and all the delightful romance of the strange wooing would be lost should he adopt the other plan. He felt that he had got off when the door of the House closed upon him without any questioning from Sister Mary Jane; but on her side the feeling was different. She was disappointed. She had guessed how things were going, though not that they had gone nearly so far, and she had been convinced that the young stranger's anxiety to see her arose from his honourable desire to set everything on a proper footing. The reader will perceive that Sister Mary Jane was too simple and too credulous. She was half vexed at the idea of losing the girl whom she had grown fond of, and half glad that Agnes had found a new life more suited to her than the routine of the House, for Agnes, it was evident, had no 'vocation,' and she did not doubt for a moment what Mr. Oswald Meredith's real object was. She had made up her mind to allow herself to be sounded, to yield forth scraps of information diplomatically, and finally to divulge everything there was to tell, and set the eager lover off to the rectory at the foot of the hill. But Sister Mary Jane was much dismayed to be asked no questions at all on the subject. She could not understand it, and all the disagreeable stories she had ever heard of the wolves that haunt the neighbourhood of a fold came into her mind and filled her with dismay. Instead of being honourable and high-minded, as she had taken it for granted he must be, was he designing and deceiving, according to the ideal of men who used to appear in all the novels? Up to this moment Sister Mary Jane had felt disposed to laugh at the Lothario of fiction. Was this that mythical personage in his improper person? The result of the interview on her side was that she reproved poor Agnes gently for a few days, and declined to allow her to go anywhere, and would not make any reference whatever to little Emmy's going to the seaside. Yes, she was to go. Oh, certainly, everything was arranged; but not a word about Emmy's friend, whose liberality procured her this change. Agnes felt her heart sink. She had expected at least to be questioned about the young stranger who must, she felt convinced, have asked questions about her, and the silence was hard to bear. Once more, indeed, she was permitted to go out to see Emmy before she went away; but

the lay Sister, the portress, was sent with her on some pretext or other. Thus it happened that when Oswald appeared as usual, he found himself confronted by a respectable visage of forty under the poke-bonnet which he had supposed to enshrine that Perugino countenance to which he had addressed so many uncompleted verses. To be sure, the Perugino face was close by, but the dragon kept so near that nothing could be said. Oswald talked a little about Emmy loudly, by way of deceiving the respectable attendant. Then he ventured upon a few hurried words in a lower tone. 'Is this an expedient of the Sisters?' he said, hastily. 'Am I never to speak to you again? Do they think they can send me away like this, and get the better of me? Never! You need not think so. You may send me away, but no one else shall.'

'Mr. Meredith, for heaven's sake——'

'I am taking care; but you don't mean to cast me off, Agnes?'

She gave him a sudden look. Her face was full of emotion. Fright, melancholy, wistfulness, inquiring wonder, were in her eyes. What did he mean? Was he as true, as reverent, as real in his love, as he had said? He could not have realised in his confident happiness and ability to do everything he wished the sense of impotent dejected wondering, and the indignation with herself, for thinking about it so, which were in Agnes's mind. But something in her eyes touched and stopped him in his eager effort to continue this undertone of conversation, to elude the scrutiny of her companion. 'Good-by,' she said, with a slight wave of her hand, hurrying on. Oswald was overcome in spite of himself. He fell behind instinctively, and watched her moving quickly along the street with the other black shadow by her in the sunshine. For the moment he ceased to think of himself and thought of her. Had it been for her comfort that he had crossed her path? It had been the most delightful new existence and pursuit to him—but to her? Oswald could not have imagined the waves of varied feeling, the secret storms that had gone over Agnes in the quiet of the convent, on account of those meetings and conversations; but he did consciously pause and ask himself whether this which had been so pleasant to him had been equally pleasant to her. It was but a momentary pause. Then he went after her a little more

slowly, not unselfish enough, even in his new care for her, not to be rather anxious that Agnes should be aware that he was there. And, who knows? perhaps it was more consolatory for her when she half turned round, standing at the door of the House waiting for admittance, to see him pass taking off his hat reverentially, and looking at her with eyes half reproachful and tender, than it would have been had he accepted the repulse she had given him, and put force upon himself and stayed absolutely away. He had no intention of staying away. He meant to continue his pursuit of her—to waylay her, to lose no possibility of getting near her. He was pertinacious, obstinate, determined, even though it annoyed her. Did it annoy her? or was there some secret pleasure in the warm glow that came over her at sight of him? She hurried in, and swore to herself not to think of this troublesome interruption of her quiet life any more. It was over. Emmy was removed, and there was an end of it. She would think of it no more; and with this determination Agnes hastened to the girls in St. Cecilia, and never left off thinking of it till weariness and youth together, making light of all those simple thorns in her pillow, plunged her into softest sleep.

Oswald went to Cara to unburden his mind next day. He did not quite know what his next step was to be. 'I think it is all right,' he said. 'You should have seen the look she gave me. She would not have given me a look like that if she had not liked me. It set me wondering whether she was as happy as—such a creature as she is ought to be. Would they scold her badly because I followed her? You know what women do—would they be hard upon her? But why? If I insisted upon being there it was not her fault.'

'They would say it was her fault.' They would say that if she had refused to speak to you you would not have come back.'

'But I should. I am not so easily discouraged. Oh, yes, perhaps if she had looked as if she hated me; but, then,' said Oswald, with complacence, 'she did not do that.'

'Don't be so vain,' said Cara, provoked. 'Oh, I *hate* you when you look vain. It makes you look silly too. If she saw you with that imbecile look on your face she would never take the trouble of thinking of you again.'

'Oh, wouldn't she?' said Oswald, looking more vain than

ever. 'Because you are insensible, that is not to say that other people are. Of course I should pull up if I did not mean anything. But I do mean a great deal. I never saw anyone like her. I told you she was like a Perugino—and you should hear her talk. She is thrown away there, Cara. I am sure she never was meant to be shut up in such a place, teaching a set of little wretches. I told her so. I told her a wife was better than a Sister.'

'Are you so very sure of that?' cried Cara; for what she called the imbecile look of vanity on Oswald's handsome face had irritated her. 'Would it be so very noble to be your wife, Oswald? Now tell me. You would like her to look up to you, and think you very grand and clever. You would read your poetry to her. You would like her to order you a very nice dinner——'

'Ye-es,' said Oswald, 'but if she smiled at me sweetly I should forgive her the dinner; and she should do as she pleased; only I should like her, of course, to please me.'

'And you would take her to the opera, and to parties—and give up your club, perhaps—and you would take a great deal of trouble in furnishing your house, and altogether enjoy yourself.'

'Very much indeed, I promise you,' said the young man, rubbing his hands.

'And now she is not enjoying herself at all,' said Cara; 'working very hard among the poor children, going to visit sick people in the hospital. Oh, yes, there would be a difference! The wife would be much the most comfortable.'

'I don't like girls to be satirical,' said Oswald. 'It puts them out of harmony, out of drawing. Now *she* said something like that. She asked me in her pretty way if it would be better to make one man happy than to serve a great number of people, and take care of those that had nobody to take care of them. That was what she said; but she did not laugh, nor put on a satirical tone.'

'That shows only that she is better than I am,' said Cara, slightly angry still; 'but not that I am wrong. Your wife! it might be nice enough. I can't tell; but it would not be a great life—a life for others, like what, perhaps, she is trying for now.'

'You are complimentary, Cara,' said Oswald, half offended. 'After all, I don't think it would be such a very bad business.'

I shall take good care of my wife, never fear. She *shall* enjoy herself. Don't you know,' he added with a laugh, 'that everybody thinks you and I are going to make it up between us?'

Cara turned away. 'You ought not to let anyone think so,' she said.

'What harm does it do? It amuses everybody, keeping them on the stretch for news. They think we are actually engaged. The times that Edward has tried to get it out of me—all particulars—and my mother too. It is far too good a joke not to keep it up.'

'But, Oswald, I don't like it. It is not right.'

'Oh, don't be so particular, Cara. I shall believe you are going to be an old maid, like Aunt Cherry, if you are so precise. Why, what possible harm can it do? It is only keeping them on the rack of curiosity while we are laughing in our sleeves. Besides, after all, Cara *mia*, it is just a chance, you know, that it did not come to pass. If it had not been for *her*, and that she turned up just when she did——'

'I am much obliged to you, Oswald. You think, then, that it all depends upon you, and that the moment it pleased you to throw your handkerchief——'

'Do not be absurd, my dear child.' You know I am very fond of you,' said Oswald, with such a softening in his voice, and so kind a look in his eyes, that Cara was quite disarmed. He put his hand lightly upon her waist as a brother might have done. 'We have known each other all our lives—we shall know each other all the rest of our lives. I tell you everything—you are my little conscience keeper, my adviser. I don't know what I should do without you,' he said; and, being of a caressing disposition, Oswald bent down suddenly, and kissed the soft cheek which was lifted towards him. There were two doors to the room—the one most generally used was in its second division, the back drawing-room; but another door opened directly out upon the staircase, and the two were standing, as it happened, directly in front of this. By what chance it happened that Miss Cherry chose this door to come in by, and suddenly, softly threw it open at this particular moment, will never be known. There is something in such a salutation, especially when at all ambiguous in its character, which seems to stir up all kinds of malicious influences for its betrayal. The sudden action of

Miss Cherry in opening this door revealed the little incident not only to her but to Edward, who was coming up the stair. Cara rushed to the other end of the room, her face scorching with shame; but Oswald, more used to the situation, stood his ground, and laughed. 'Ah, Aunt Cherry, are you really going?' he said, holding out his hand to her, while Edward stalked into the room like a ghost. Of all the party, Oswald was the least discomposed. Indeed, it rather pleased him, his vanity and his sense of fun being both excited. He had a kind of notion that Edward was jealous, and this added to his mischievous enjoyment. Where was the harm?

'Yes, I am going away,' said Miss Cherry, 'and perhaps it is time—though I sometimes don't know whether I ought to go or stay,' she added, mournfully, with a glance at her niece. Cara had turned her back upon the company, and was in the other room arranging some music on the piano, with trembling fingers. She could not bear either reproach or laughter, for her shame was excessive, and out of all proportion to the magnitude of the offence, as was to be expected at her years.

'Oh, you must not be uneasy about Cara,' said Oswald, lightly. 'Cara will be well taken care of. We will all take care of her. I must go now, Cara. Good morning. I am going to look after the business I have been telling you of. Why, there is nothing to make a bother about,' he said, in an undertone. 'Cara! crying! Why, what harm is done?'

'Oh, tell them, Oswald; if you have any pity for me, tell them!'

'Tell them what? There is nothing to tell. If they put foolish constructions on the simplest incident, it is not our fault. Good-by; only look unconcerned as I do; there is no possible harm done.'

And with this he went away, shaking hands with Miss Cherry, who was very pale with agitation and disapproval. As for Edward, he gave her a very formal message from his mother about a drive which Cara was to take with her in the afternoon. He scarcely spoke to the girl herself, who indeed kept in the background and said nothing. Edward had grown quite pale: he bowed in a formal way, and spoke so stiffly that Miss Cherry was almost driven to self-assertion. 'Pray don't let Mrs. Meredith take any trouble about Cara's drive,' she said, drawing herself up. 'Cara can get an airing very easily if this is troublesome.'

'What I said was that my mother would call at four,' said the young man; and he bowed again and went away. With what a heavy heart he went downstairs, not seeing the pitiful look Cara stole at him as he went out, this time through the legitimate door, the neglect of which had caused all the mischief; no, not the neglect, but Oswald's dreadful wicked levity and her own (as it almost seemed) crime.

'I am going away,' said Miss Cherry, with dignity. 'I will not ask you what you don't choose to tell me, Cara. I have seen enough for myself; but I can't help saying that I go with a heavy heart. Your father and you have both gone out of my reach. It is not for me to blame you. I am old-fashioned, and prefer old ways, and perhaps it is you who know best.'

'Oh, Aunt Cherry,' said the girl, in a passion of tears. 'What can I say to you? You are mistaken, indeed you are mistaken. I am not concealing anything.'

'We will not speak of it, my dear,' said Miss Cherry with trembling lips. 'You are out of my reach, both your father and you. Oh, when I think how things used to be! What a good child you were—so true, so transparent! and now I don't seem to know what truth is—everything is muddled up. Oh, I wonder if it is our fault! They say that to have a mother is everything; but I thought I had tried to be like a mother,' cried Miss Cherry, giving way to the inevitable tears.

'I am not false,' said Cara, putting her arms round her. 'Oh, Aunt Cherry, believe me. I did not know what he was going to do. It was to thank me, because he had been asking—my advice—'

'Your advice! Ah, you will be fine guides to each other, if this is how you treat your best friends,' said Miss Cherry. But she yielded a little to the girl's caressing, and dried her eyes. 'I am going away with a heavy heart,' she added, after this partial making-up, shaking her head sorrowfully. 'I don't know what it is all coming to. *He* is never at home—always *there*:—and you—. In my time we thought of what was right, not only what we liked best; but they tell us in all the books that the world is getting wiser, and knows better every day. I only hope you will find it so. Oh, Cara,' said Miss Cherry, 'it is thought a mean thing to say that honesty is the best policy, though it was the fashion once; but

it is. I don't mean to say that is the highest way of looking at it; but still it is so. For one vexation you may have by speaking the truth, you will find a dozen from not speaking it. I wish you would think of this. But I will not say any more.'

'I am not a liar,' said Cara, with a wild indignation in her heart which was beyond words; and she refused to speak again, and saw her aunt off with a throbbing heart, but neither tears nor words beyond what was absolutely needful; never had she parted with anyone in this way before. She came in and shut herself up in her room, directing them to say that she was ill, and could not drive when Mrs. Meredith came for her. Honesty the best policy! What breaking up of heaven and earth was it that placed her amid all these shadows and falsities, she whose spirit revolted from everything that was even doubtful? She lay down upon her little bed, and cried herself, not to sleep, but into the quiet of exhaustion. Aunt Cherry, who had been like her mother to her, had gone away wounded and estranged. Edward—what a countenance his had been as he turned and went out of the room! And Oswald, who had dragged her into this false position and would not clear her, laughed! Cara hid her eyes from the light in one of those outbursts of youthful despair, which are more intolerable than heavier sorrows. Such pangs have before now driven young souls to desperation. She was hemmed in, and did not know what to do. And where in all the world was she to find a friend now?

While she was lying there in her despair, Oswald, walking along lightly, could scarcely keep himself from laughing aloud when he thought of this quaint misadventure. How absurd it was! He hoped Miss Cherry would not be too hard upon Cara—but he took the idea of the scolding she would receive with a certain complacence as well as amusement. It was as good as a play; Miss Cherry's look of horror, the blanched face of the virtuous Edward, and poor little Cara's furious blush and overwhelming shame. What an innocent child it must be to feel such a trifle so deeply! But they were all rather tiresome people with their punctilios, Oswald felt, and the sooner he had emancipated himself, and settled independently, the better. Thanks to that sensible old governor, who, after all, could not have chosen a better moment to die in, there was no need for waiting, and nobody had any power to

raise difficulties in respect to money. No, he could please himself; he could do what he liked without interference from anyone, and he would do it. He would win his little wife by his spear and his bow, without intervention of the old fogeys who spoil sport; and when the romance had been exhausted they would all live happy ever after like a fairy tale. As for any harm to be done in the meantime, any clouding of other lives, he puffed that into the air with a 'Pshaw, nonsense!' as he would have puffed away the smoke of his cigar.

But it surprised him when he returned home to find his mother in tears over Edward's resolution, after all, to carry out his original plan and go out to India. Mrs. Meredith was broken-hearted over this change. 'I thought it was all settled. Oh, Oswald, there are but two of you. How can I bear to part with one of my boys?' she said.

'Well, mother, but you had made up your mind to it; and, to tell the truth, it is a shame to sacrifice such prospects as his,' said the elder son, with exemplary wisdom. 'I am very sorry, since you take it so to heart; but otherwise one can't deny it's the best thing he could do.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CRISIS APPROACHING.

WHILE Oswald went about the streets so lightly, and thought so pleasantly of his prospects, another mind, still more agitated than that of Cara, was turning over and over all he had done for the last five or six weeks, and all that he might be about to do in the future. Agnes in her convent, with all her routine of duties—with the little tinkling bell continually calling her to one thing or another, to matins or evensong, to 'meditation,' to this service or that, to choir practice, to dinner and tea and recreation—carried a tumult of fancies about with her, which no one, except perhaps Sister Mary Jane, guessed. Oswald would have stood aghast could he have seen into that little ocean of excited feeling, where the waves rose higher and higher as the hours went on, and sometimes a swelling tide almost swept the thinker herself away—though indeed he would have been so unable to understand

it that the inspection would probably have taught him little. How easily he took all this, which was so tremendous to her! and that not only because of the difference between man and woman, but because of the fundamental difference in temperament, which was greater still. Agnes had known but little that was lovely or pleasant in her life. Her rectory-home was neither; her father and mother and brothers and sisters were all vulgar and commonplace, struggling for existence, and for such privileges as it contained, one against another, and against the world, each grumbling at the indulgences the other managed to secure. The parish and its poor—and its rich, who were not much more attractive—had been all the world she had known; and the only beings who had crossed her horizon, who were not struggling like her own people, in the sordid race of existence, to get something, whatever it might be, were the Sisters in the House, and such a gentle retired person as Miss Cherry, who was not fighting for anything, who was ready to yield to anyone, and whose mild existence was evidently not pervaded by that constant recollection of self which filled up all the life of the others. This was what had brought the visionary girl into the House, which was sordid, too, in its details, though not in its spirit. Then there had been suddenly presented to her, just as she settled down to the work of the House, an image of something new, something more spontaneous, more easy in generosity, more noble in liberality than anything she had ever encountered. What did it matter that this type of nobleness was a handsome young man? Visionary Agnes, in the daring of her youth, saw no harm, but rather a beautiful fitness, in the fact that this revelation of the ideal should have all that was best in external as well as in more important things. He had stopped short—no doubt with all the brilliant world, which she did not know, waiting for him, arrested till he should rejoin it—to carry the wounded child to the hospital. He had left those mysterious glories of life, day after day and week after week, to go and ask for little Emmy. How wonderful this was! The devotion of Sister Mary Jane, the loving-kindness of Miss Cherry, faded before such an example; for they had not the world at their feet as this young paladin evidently had.

This was how the first chapter of the story came about. It opened her eyes (Agnes thought) to nobleness undreamed

of, and for the first few weeks the universe itself had grown more bright to her. Could it be possible, then, that in 'the world' itself, which the Sisters had abjured—in that splendid glorious 'society' which even ascetic books spoke of as something too full of entrancements and seductions to be resisted by any but the most heroic, there were still opportunities of living the highest unselfish life, to the glory of God and the comfort of man? When Agnes found that this ideal hero of hers had thoughts less exalted in his bosom—that so small a motive as the wish to see herself and talk to her, had something to do with his devotion to the orphan, her visionary mind received a shock. Probably, had Oswald's enthusiasm been for another, she would have been permanently disquieted by the discovery; but there is something strangely conciliatory in the fact that it is one's self who is admired and followed. Such trivial emotions detract from the perfection of an ideal character; but still it is a much more easy thing to forgive your own lover than anyone else's. And the more he sought her, the more Agnes's heart, in spite of herself, inclined towards the man who could be thus moved. The ideal stole away, but so insensibly, in rose-coloured clouds, that she had not discovered the departure of her first admiration and wonder before something else stole in. It was not all goodness, nobleness, Christian charity, perhaps, that moved him; but what was it? Love, which in its way is divine too. Only after this altogether new influence had made itself felt did doubts appear, making a chaos in her mind. Were his sentiments as true as she had first thought? Was it right to counterfeit goodness, even in the name of love? Was not, after all, the life of the Sisters, the life of sacrifice, more noble than the other smiling life, of which he was the emblem? Was it not a mean thing to go back from that, and all one's high thoughts of it, to the common romance of a story-book? Might not this romance lead back again to those vulgar beaten paths out of which Agnes had supposed herself to have escaped? And, ah! was it true after all? this was the refrain which kept coming back. Was it love and not levity? Was he seeking her seriously, in honour and truth; or was it possible that he was not noble at all, seeking her only for his own amusement? These thoughts shook Agnes to the bottom of her soul. They were like convulsions passing over her, tearing her spirit asunder. She went on with her work and all her religious exercises,

and nobody found out how curiously unaware of what she was doing the girl was; living in a dream, performing mechanically all outside functions. Who does know, of those who are most near to us, what is going on in our minds? And not a calm Sister, not a little orphan in the House, would have been more incapable of comprehending, than was Oswald—to whom it would have seemed impossible—that anything in the world could produce so much emotion. Not only was it incomprehensible to him, but he could not even have found it out; and that his conduct should move either Agnes or Cara to this passionate suffering was an idea out of his grasp altogether. He would have been astounded, and more than astounded, had he been able to see into these two strange phases of unknown existence, which he could not have realised; but yet he was interested as warmly as his nature permitted. He was ‘in love;’ he was ready to do a great deal to secure to himself the girl he loved. He was ready to proceed to the most unmistakable conclusions, to commit himself, to blazon his love to the eyes of day. Perhaps even the sense that it was in his power to do this, without waiting for a keynote from anyone else, had something to do with his perfect calm.

After this, however, the departure of Emmy brought a new phase to the strange wooing. There was no reason now why Agnes should go out alone; and watchful Sister Mary Jane, who was not satisfied with the shape the affair was taking, exercised an undisclosed surveillance over her young disciple. Things ‘of the world,’ like love and marriage, are out of the way of professed Sisters, Anglican or otherwise; but Sister Mary Jane had long recognised that Agnes Burchell had not a ‘vocation,’ and she was a woman, though she was a Sister, and had a soft spot in her heart which would have made her not inexorable to an incipient romance. But why didn’t he ask me about her friends? Sister Mary Jane said to herself. This seemed to her the test by which Oswald was to be known, and he had borne its application badly. Accordingly she watched over Agnes with double zeal, scarcely letting her out of her own sight. Someone was always ready to accompany her, when she went out; and even in the daily procession of the school-girls Agnes was never left alone. Here, however, Oswald was just as much in advance of everything Agnes could have thought of, as she

was in advance of him in intensity of feeling. Nothing could exceed the cleverness, the patience, the pertinacity with which he baffled this attempt to shut him out from her. He would not be shut out; he haunted the neighbourhood like the air they breathed. The door seemed never to open but he was within reach, and Agnes never went to a window without seeing him. He passed the procession as it went demurely along the street; he was present somewhere when it came out, and when it went in; whenever Agnes was visible he was there. This might have been the most intolerable persecution, enough to drive the victim crazy; but oddly enough it did not produce this effect. On the contrary, the sense of his constant presence near her, watching her perpetually, became like an intoxication to Agnes. She went about more and more like a person in a dream. To feel that when you lift your eyes you will most probably see a handsome face full of tender interest, anxiously waiting to secure your answering glance, and beautiful eyes full of love and eagerness watching you wherever you go, is not a thing which produces a very displeasing effect upon the mind of a girl. He could not approach her directly, had not a chance of speaking to her; but he never gave her time to forget him. The excitement of this pursuit delighted Oswald. It would have pleased him, even had he been much less truly touched by genuine love than he was, so far as that love can be considered genuine which springs from the sudden impression made by a fair face, and which has no foundation (to speak of) of personal knowledge or intimate acquaintance. As this, however, is what is called love by the great majority of the world, we need not apologise for Oswald's sentiment, which was quite real and very engrossing. But it suited his character admirably to carry it on in this way. He enjoyed the sensation of foiling all precautions, and conveying by a glance, by the taking off of his hat, by his mere appearance, as much as other men do by chapters of more practical wooing. Agnes, after a week or two of such treatment, began to forget all her doubts, and to feel herself floated upwards into a visionary world, a kind of poetical paradise, in which the true knight worships and the fair lady responds at a saintly distance, infinitely above him yet beneath him, half angelic yet half parasitic, owing to his worship the greater part of her grandeur. She made a little feeble resistance, now and then, saying to

herself that she did not know him, that he did not know her; asking herself how could this interchange of glances and the dozen words they had spoken to each other form any foundation for 'friendship,' which in the trouble of her mind was what she chose to call it? But such arguments do not count for much in the mind of a girl who feels and knows that all her comings and goings are marked by adoring eyes, that some instinct guides her lover across her path whenever she leaves the shelter of her home, and that his love is great enough to encounter perpetual fatigue and trouble, and to make him give up his entire leisure to the chance of seeing her. If it ever gleamed across her mind that he might have found out an easier way by making love to her parents, and that this would at once have delivered them both from all possibility of misunderstanding, the idea faded as quickly as it entered, driven away by the next appearance of Oswald's reverential salutation, his eager glance, his apparently accidental presence. Sister Mary Jane very seldom went with the procession, and it was not etiquette to talk of what was seen or heard outside, and the Superior of the House was so occupied as to be beyond the possibility of gossip. So that she did not hear of the daily appearance of the intruder. Sister Catherine was short-sighted, and very much taken up with the demeanour of the girls. If she remarked him at all with her dim eyes, she took it for granted that he lived in the neighbourhood and was going to his occupation, whatever it might be, when the girls went out for their walk. 'I don't keep up the practice of recognising the people I knew in the world,' she said on one occasion, seeing somebody taking off his hat. 'Never mind whether it was for you or for me; it is best to take no notice—unless, indeed, with real friends.' But she did not mention the incident to the Superior, and Agnes, though she trembled, said nothing. The daily encounter was like wine in her veins. It intoxicated her with a curious dreamy intoxication of the spirit. Her head was in the clouds as she walked, and she did not know which was real—the curious life which she passed like a dream in the House, or that glimpse of freedom and light and sunshine which she had abroad, light in which he stood enshrined like the young Saint Michael in the painted window. By degrees that moment of encounter became the principal fact in the day. Who was she to resist this fanciful, delicate worship?

and Agnès did not know that it was to him no visionary reverential distant worship, but the most amusing and seductive pursuit in the world.

It was evident, however, that this could not go on indefinitely without coming to some conclusion. A few weeks stole by; Oswald did not tire, and Agnes grew more and more self-absorbed. She struggled, but ineffectually, against the sweet, strange fascination which rapt her out of the vulgar world altogether, in which she still went on mechanically doing her duties, very good to the children, very submissive and sweet to the Sisters, caring for nothing so much as to sit still in a corner and muse and dream when her work was done. Agnes felt herself a very unsatisfactory person all these weeks. She was ashamed to think how little her heart was in her work, although she did it to all appearance more dutifully than ever. All her little disquiet was over. She bore the dulness of routine like an angel, because of this visionary refuge of dreams which she had; but with all this outward sweetness Agnes felt that in her early days in the House, when her heart rebelled at the details, but was warm as an enthusiast's in the spirit of the place, she was more true than now. Now she was patient, docile, gentle with everybody, and when she had an opportunity of quiet would stroll into the little rude chapel with its bare walls—for what; for prayer? She had gone there to pray for strength many a time when her patience was nearly at an end before; but now what visions stole unwittingly yet too sweetly upon her dreamy soul, what words imagined or remembered kept echoing in her ears! Poor Agnes, how happy she was and how miserable! Good Sister Catherine, short-sighted and dull, wondered over the young teacher's growth in grace, and whispered to the Superior that a great work was going on, and that their young helper would soon devote herself, as they had done, and join them altogether in their work. But Sister Mary Jane, who was wise, shook her head. She saw something in the dreamer's eyes which did not mean devotion. And oh, how guilty poor Agnes felt when, stealing out of chapel where her prayers had so soon melted away into those musings, she encountered the blue eyes which Oswald had thought too beautiful not to be merciful as well! Agnes trembled daily to be asked, 'What are you thinking of?' What was she thinking of? how could she tell anyone—much

less Sister Mary Jane? It was shameful, terrible, to carry such thoughts into such a place. How she had fallen off from the first fervour, the early enthusiasm of self-devotion! to what was that devotion now turned aside? Alas! alas! But, all the same, in external matters the change was for the better. The more pious of the girls thought her a true Agnes, fit votary of the saint who bears the lamb. They hoped she would keep that gentle name and be Sister Agnes when she was professed.

Thus Agnes got an altogether fictitious reputation while Oswald carried on his wooing; and summer came, and the long evenings grew more and more akin to dreams. Oswald did what few men of his class would do for love or anything else—went without his dinner, evening after evening. In the hot days the girls had their walk later; and, as soon as he found this out, love and the excitement of pursuit and the determination to succeed, persuaded him, between them, to this sublime point of self-sacrifice. After a while he was rewarded. And this was how it came about.

It was June; the summer had expanded until the days were almost at their longest, and, as the season had all through been a very warm and bright one, everything was in its perfection of summer beauty. Oswald had seen the school procession trip in one evening by the door of the House, leaving behind all the lovely glow of a summer sunset. He turned round and walked away towards that brilliant western blaze with a sigh; twilight was in his face, which the golden light caught aslant and glorified. It was getting on to the wistful moment of the day when the excitement of the sun's departure is over, and Nature, too, sighs in exhaustion and gentle sadness; and it was the wistful moment for the lover, his lady just disappeared out of sight, and the impossibility of following her, speaking to her, getting any point of connection with her, overwhelming his mind. Was this how it was always to be; never to get any further; never to do anything but wait and gaze and salute her as she passed; was this to be all? Rather indeed this for her, than anything with another! But yet the days were long, and it is dreary always to wait:

When there suddenly appeared against the blaze in the west a black poke-bonnet, the ugliest of its kind. He pricked up his ears and quickened his steps. How he could think it

might be she whom he had just seen to disappear at the convent door, I don't understand; but his heart began to beat and his steps quickened as if by magic. Nothing short, however, of a novel adaptation of the great Indian juggling trick could have brought Agnes there. She was, on the contrary, safe in the House, superintending the girls who were getting ready for tea, with the sweetest angelic smile upon her face. The girls were hot from their walk, tired and troublesome and noisy; but Agnes bore with them like a saint—did not hear them, indeed, having retired into her private chapel and place of musing. But if it was not Agnes, if indeed it was someone as unlike Agnes as could be conceived, Agnes herself could scarcely have been so desirable to meet. It was the old portress of the House, the lay Sister who had several times accompanied her on her expeditions to the hospital. A sudden inspiration came to Oswald. There could be nothing improper in addressing her, a perfectly safe person to whom his interest in little Emmy could bear nothing but the most natural and genuine aspect. He hastened up to her with anxious looks and asked how the little patient was, and if any news of her had been received at the House.

'Oh, bless you, sir, yes!' said the lay Sister; 'she's been very bad, but now she's better. She won't be a long liver, that child. She's very delicate, but come when it will the little lamb is prepared. She is the piouslest child I ever came across.'

'Do you mean to say she is dying?' said Oswald, alarmed in spite of himself.

'Oh, no, sir! Some time, I make no doubt, but not now; but she has been that delicate—you could blow her away with a puff of wind. So she has never come back. Indeed, I hear the teacher of the third division, that's Miss Burchell—you've seen her—the one as always went to the hospital——'

'Oh, yes, I have seen her!'

'Delicate, too, sir. I'm not easy deceived, and I saw in a moment as she was not fit for the work.'

'Is she ill?' said Oswald, all tremulous and excited, feeling disposed to rush forthwith to the House without rhyme or reason, and carry her off.

'Oh, no, sir; not at all! But Sister Mary Jane, she's the Superior——'

'Yes, yes; I know.'

'She thinks that she'd be the better for a change, and so, as she wants to send some more children to the Sanatorium, she's made up her mind to send her, for she'd be a deal the better she says of a little sea air herself.'

'Ah!' said Oswald, '*she* who is going to the Sanatorium is Sister Mary Jane?'

'Not at all, sir, oh no, the one that is going is Miss Burchell. Sister Mary Jane is the Superior, and she thinks it will do her good and take off her thoughts.'

'Ah, I see,' said Oswald, gravely. 'When does Miss Burchell go? you might ask her from me to remember me to little Emmy; when does she go!'

'To-morrow, sir. I am sure, sir, you're very good to think so much about such a little thing as that; but she is a dear little thing. I have understood, sir, that it was you that paid for her going——'

'That is a trifle, Sister——'

'Oh, I am not called Sister,' said the portress, blushing with pleasure, 'I am not a lady like the rest. I am only in the House to open the door and to do the chargs; but if I was the Superior I could not be more interested for little Emmy. Bless you, sir, she is the piouesest little thing! And thank you, sir, for your goodness to her; that child's prayers will bring down a blessing on you.'

'Amen!' said Oswald, himself feeling much more pious than usual. 'I want it badly enough——'

'And I'll tell Miss Burchell to give Emily your love——'

'On second thoughts,' said Oswald, astutely, 'it will be better not to say anything about it. The Sister Superior might not like a stranger to send messages.'

'That is very true,' said the lay Sister, perceiving all at once that she too might have come in for a rebuke; and after this she ran on into sundry communications about Sister Catherine who was newly arrived and not quite up to the work. 'For them that know such ladies as Sister Mary Jane and Miss Burchell is naturally particular,' said the portress.

'Very naturally,' said Oswald, with fervour. He asked her to put a sovereign for him into the poor-box at the chapel door, and then sent her off well pleased, while he turned back in great haste to prepare for his going. Here was his opportunity at last.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SUPREME MOMENT.

It was a beautiful morning in June when Agnes started from the House with her little charge, who was going to the Convent Sanatorium at Limpet Bay. She scarcely knew so soon as the porteress did, who had thus fortunately warned the eager lover—for Sister Mary Jane had thought it best to screen Agnes from all risks, and informed her only upon the day before the expedition.

‘You want a little change; it will do you good,’ the Sister Superior said, pinching the girl’s pale cheek. ‘I thought we should have had to send you home; but a little breath of sea air will do you good.’

‘Oh, I do not require to be sent home!’ Agnes said, with a sudden flush of fright. To go home was far from being what she desired. Indeed, she did not quite like to leave the House and the girls’ procession even for one day. The pale little girl who was her companion was excited and noisy with joy; but as she took her seat in a corner of a second-class carriage Agnes felt less exhilarated than depressed, though there was a curious jumble of feelings in her mind. The motion was pleasant, the fresh air—after the languid breezes of London—revived and refreshed the country-born girl. Ah! green fields still looked just so, the birds sang as of old, only there was something in the breeze and the sunshine and the birds which she never had known before—something—which suggested a want, a void, and yet a hope. She would not say to herself what that void was, but yet felt that it was strange, looking out from the window of the carriage, not to see one face which she always saw when she looked out. Very strange—and yet, when she reminded herself, so much more strange would it have been had she seen it. It was quite early when they started; the fresh morning lights, still so soft in their early brightness, caught the dews lying still here and there in the corners. The child prattled on for an hour or so, then got tired, and leaned her head against Agnes, and went to sleep. Agnes was glad. It saved her from the necessity of answering, and allowed her to plunge into all the sweet enchantment of dreams. There is a time in most lives when

one's own thoughts are more entertaining, more absorbing, than the highest fiction, and when poetry is nothing to the vague glory of musing which envelopes the young soul like an atmosphere of its own. This was what Agnes had come to now. She supposed she was thinking, but she was no more thinking than the pale child, whose soft little sickly cheek leant up against her shoulder with such confiding ease. The child slept, being sick and weakly; the girl dreamed, being young, and feeling the sweetness of life to her very fingertips. There was nobody to disturb them, nothing but the wind of their rapid going, the rush of motion, the vision of green fields and trees flitting past, the clouds in the sky sailing over them. In such circumstances even a dusty railway journey grows poetical. The black poke bonnet and the conventual cloak did not make it less so, though, alas! they made those thoughts, when she suddenly woke up to a consciousness of them, very guilty and dreadful to Agnes. But for this morning at least, once in a way, she had escaped from the duties of life, and the soft haze which crept over her seemed more allowable during this interval in which it was evident she could do nothing else. She had her duty with her in the shape of the little invalid by her side, to whom Providence had sent this soothing medicine of sleep: then was not Agnes free? Something as subduing as sleep itself, and more sweet than dreams, brought a film over her soft eyes. It was only a second-class carriage on a dusty railway, but one wonders if in any human paradise ever dreamt by poets there could be anything more sweet.

In the same train there was another traveller by no means sharing in this soft trance of enchantment. Oswald, you may be sure, was travelling first-class. His morning dress had all the easy perfection which belongs to an English gentleman's morning toilette; he was the very impersonation of that simple luxury which pleases our insular vanity, which costs the utmost possible with the least possible show. And he was delighted with his adventure, with his own cleverness in bringing this adventure to so prosperous a point, with the chance of seeing Agnes and having her to himself; but anxious, and turning over a hundred plans in his mind as to how he was to manage it all.

Limpet Bay was a very small place on the banks of the Thames, just where the river becomes sea, and had to be

reached by a branch from a junction whence trains only went at very awkward hours. This was why it had been necessary to start so early. The question was where and how he was to show himself, so as not to alarm too much the shy object of his pursuit, and at the same time to take full advantage of this propitious moment. Oswald's mind was busy with this subject all the way to the junction. He had no time for the dreams which wrapped Agnes in a delicious stillness of thought; he had to debate this important question with himself. If he showed at once, she might think it right to shut herself up in the Sanatorium until the time came for her return. Even if she did so he had still all the chances of the journey in his favour, but these were limited, and subject to interruption; whereas, if he kept concealed, who could doubt that Agnes would stray out upon the sands, or to the little pier, or about the low rocks on the beach to taste the salt breezes coming strong and cheery over the sea? He resolved at last to deny himself, and trust to this after certainty, notwithstanding that the temptations to premature self-discovery were strong. Fortunately the carriages in which they were seated went through, and there was no change made at the junction, which must have betrayed him; and there he sat, his heart beating, his mind exhilarated and in lively action, pleased with himself and his plans and his prospects, as well as delighted with the thought of so soon meeting her. It was an emotion altogether different from that of Agnes—less poetical, less spiritual, less entrancing. He knew what he wanted, and would in all probability get it; but what she wanted was that vague infinite which no soul ever gets, in this universe at least. To him the moments when he should have met her, when he should have persuaded her into saying anything or everything that a shy maiden could say, when he should carry her off triumphantly and marry her, and make her his own, were all quite distinct, and better than this moment, when he held himself in leash—waiting and impatient; but to her would any moment ever be equal to that hour of dreams? Thus they swept along, each alone, characteristically occupied, making progress, conscious or unconscious, out of the sweet preface and overture of existence into life.

It came about as Oswald had foreseen. The day was one of the loveliest days of early June, the foliage still fresh in its

spring livery, the earth still downy in soft green of the springing corn and softer velvet of the grass; the daisies and buttercups, simplest of delights, were still a wonder to behold, the wild roses sweet on all the hedgerows, lighting up the country with delicate flushes of colour. Then as they neared the sea came the greyer greenness of the downs, soft undulations, yellow stretches of sand, surrounded by the blue glory of the salt water, broken and cheerful with white wavelets, not big enough to trouble anything save in elvish mischief, the nearest approach to laughter that is in nature. The red roofs of the village, the fishing-boats, even the half-built chaos of a Marine Parade, by means of which Limpet Bay meant to tempt visitors one day or other, were beautiful to Oswald as they approached, and wove themselves like a picture into Agnes's fancies. Her little charge woke, and was clamorous with pleasure. Was that the sea? were those the sands where Emmy went to play? were these brown things rocks? Her questions were innumerable. A Sister of the same order, a mild-eyed woman, made half-beautiful by the close white cap and collar, which threw up the healthful tints of her face, met them, and conducted them to the Sanatorium, or Convalescent-home of the sisterhood, which rose, with its peaked roofs, in the semi-ecclesiastical cottage-Gothic which Anglicanism has appropriated to itself, a little apart from the village. Oswald, watching anxiously from his window, kept himself out of sight till the little party had gone with their boxes and baskets. He was the only first-class passenger who had come that day, or for many days, to Limpet Bay, and the population, so much as there was, received him with excitement. It seemed possible that he might be going to stay, and what a success for the place to have a gentleman—a *gentleman!*—so early in the year. Two or three loungers volunteered to show him the inn, others to carry his things, though he had nothing to carry, others to guide him to the port. A *bourgeois* family might be more profitable in the long run, but it is not so exciting to the imagination as a gentleman—a real gentleman, generally supposed to be a creature to whom money is absolutely indifferent, and whose pockets are full for everybody's benefit. He shook them all off, however, and went through the village to the sands, where he sat down under a rock to wait. There was nobody there, not even little Emmy and her convalescent companions, nothing

but a boat or two on the shore, a fisher-boy or so, half in half out of the water. And the little waves leaped and laughed and gurgled, and the big ones rolled softly in with their long hus—sh on the warm sands. Scenery there was none to speak of—a blue sea, a blue sky, the one flecked with wavelets, the other with cloudlets; a brownish-yellow slope of sand, a grey-green shoulder of velvety mossy down, a few low fantastic rocks, a rude brown-red fishing coble; yet with what a sense of beauty and pleasantness those nothings filled the mind! mere air and sunshine and summer sounds, and simplest life—nothing more.

Oswald sat and waited, not very patiently, behind the bit of rock. Sometimes he forgot himself for a moment, and mused almost like Agnes, but with thoughts more active. If he could but get her into one of those boats and take her out upon the blue silence of the sea, where no one could interfere with him, no one interrupt his love-tale, not even her own scruples! Now the decisive moment of his life (he said to himself) was at hand. Never again would he have such an opportunity—everything must be settled to-day. It was the last day of this sweet clandestine romance which pleased his fancy so much more than serious wooing. After this it would be necessary to descend to the precautions of ordinary life, to see her family, to ask the consent of her father and mother, to arrange horrible business, and fall into the groove like ordinary men. But to-day! was there not anything wild, adventurous, out of the usual jog-trot, that they could do to-day? Her dress was the chief thing that restrained Oswald. He could have carried off a girl in the habiliments of ordinary life, could have persuaded her into a boating expedition (he thought), in defiance of all the conventional rules of society; but a girl in a convent dress, a girl in a close cap and poke bonnet! She only looked the fairer for that rim of solid white which made the warm tints of her complexion tell so powerfully; but the cap was a visible sign of separation from the world which daunted the boldness of the youth. Nevertheless the laughing brightness of the water and the tempting nearness of the boat made Oswald restless. He called the owner to him, who was stolidly lounging about, from time to time looking at his property, and hired it, then sent for a little basket of provisions from the inn, enough for luncheon. Was it possible that he might be able to beguile

her to go out with him? He went back to his rock, and sat, with his heart beating, to wait.

Before long a little band of the small convalescents came trooping on to the sands. Oswald felt that he was lost if he was discovered by these small women, or at least by Emmy, who was among them, and he stole round to the other side of his rock, hiding himself till they passed on. There was a little donkey-chair, with two who were still invalids, tenderly driven along the smooth sands by the mild-eyed Sister whom he had seen receiving Agnes at the railway. They went on, passing him to a further point, where shells and seaweed were to be found; and the voices and laughter of the children sounded sweetly from that distance upon the fresh breeze from the sea. If they had been nearer he would not have found them so musical. Finally there appeared a solitary figure in black robes, intercepting the light. She was gazing at the sea, so that Oswald could not see her face. It seemed to him that he knew her step though it was noiseless; that no one could mistake her; but still it was not absolutely certain it was she. She came along slowly, her footsteps altogether undirected by her eyes, which were fixed on the sea. It was not the maiden meditation of the poet. Her eyes were with her heart, and that was far away. She had kept behind, happily, while the Sister took out her little band, and now came alone, moving softly over the long stretch of beach, now and then stopping to look at the sea. It was during one of these pauses that Oswald rose from his place of partial concealment, and went along the sands to meet her. His steps were inaudible upon that soft footing, and it was impossible to say what influence it was which made Agnes turn round suddenly and meet him straight, face to face. The start she gave made every line of her figure, all shrouded in the black cloak, tremble. She uttered a little cry unawares, and put up her hands in alarm and wonder. You would have said he was the last person in the world whom she expected to see; and yet she had done nothing but think of him every step of the way as she came along; and the last person she wished to see—though even the thought of him, which accompanied her wherever she went, made the world a changed place to Agnes. But to be thinking of an individual whom you believe to be far off, and entirely separated from you, and then to turn round and see him at your elbow, is startling, even when the

sentiment is less intense than that which was in the girl's mind.

'You are surprised to see me,' he said, hastening to her side.

'Yes,' she said; 'very much surprised.' Then trying to regain her composure, 'I did not know—it is a coincidence—this is such a very quiet place ——'

'Very quiet, and how lovely! I have been sitting under that rock' (Agnes turned round to look at it) 'waiting for you.'

'Waiting—for me!'

'Why should I make believe,' said Oswald; 'or why should you wonder? What should I come here for but to see you? to watch over you at a distance, and—I confess it, though it may seem selfish—to speak to you when I could find an opportunity ——'

'Indeed, indeed!' she said, clasping her hands, 'you ought not—you must not! I have said so before.'

'Do you think it likely,' said Oswald, with fine seriousness, 'that I should have followed you like your shadow for so long, and leave off all at once, without explanation, without reason? Agnes, here we are safe and quite out of the reach of interruption. Here you may listen to me without shlocking—yourself, or anyone. Hear me first. The poorest beggar in the street you will give a hearing to, why not to me? Let me tell you everything. Let me ask you what I *must* ask—let me know my fate.'

'Mr. Meredith,' she said, speaking very low and quickly, 'these are not words to be used to me. I—I do not know you ——'

'Not know me!' he repeated with ingenuous wonder.

'I mean—of course I have seen you a great many times. Of course I—but I ought not to know you,' she went on, with a little vehemence. 'I have—nothing to do with you.'

'How unkind, how unkind you are!'

This reproach silenced her. She gave him a hasty look, with a sudden, half-supplicating movement of her hands.

'When a man loves a woman,' said Oswald, with anxious art, 'they are almost always strangers to each other. Do you blame him if he takes every means to introduce himself, to try to get her to know him, to believe in him, to reply to him? You are not at home; not in circumstances to allow

this. What could I do? I would have brought my mother; but I told you what happened to us, and the trouble my mother is in. And, besides, pardon me if I had a hope that you, who were not a common girl like others, would understand me, would let me speak without all the vulgar preliminaries——. We are not like two nobodies, two butterflies of whom no one knows anything,' he said, with a vague flourish of trumpets.

Agnes made him no reply; she was without words. Indeed, she was a little overawed by this explanation—'not like two nobodies, of whom no one knows anything.' Who was he? what had he done to lift him to the rank of those whom other people knew?

'At all events,' he said, after a pause, 'will you not give me my chance now? We are here, with no one to say a word, nobody to interfere with us, no one to think we are doing wrong. Let me have my chance now. If you condemn me I promise to go away, I shall have no heart to trouble you longer,' he said, in a pathetic tone, which made poor Agnes tremble. Had she the heart to condemn him? Oh, how little he knew! She yielded, saying to herself that it was the shortest way; that anything else would be foolish; and gave her consent, without looking at him, with a grave little movement of her head. He led her to the rock where he had been sitting waiting for her, and where she now followed him without a word. How their hearts were beating, both of them, though all was so still! She sat down on the smooth rock, he half kneeling on the sand by her side. The soft summer air surrounded them; the sea, dropping out of its morning smiles, fell into a hush of listening, and stilled everything about that the tale might not be disturbed. 'Hush—sh,' said the soft, long waves as the tide stole in. A few soft clouds flitted over the sun, softening his mid-day radiance: the hush of noon fell upon earth and sea. And there Agnes sat, throned in that momentary judgment-seat of her womanhood, with his fate, as he said, in her hands. The words had a deeper meaning than Oswald thought of. The fate of other lives hung on that decision—of her own more than of his. But neither of them thought of that. Would she accept him? it was incredible that she could refuse him. This was the real conviction in his heart; and yet he trembled too,

Neither of them knew how long they sat there, while Agnes on her throne listened—trembling, blushing, weeping, hiding soft gleams of sympathetic looks, keeping back kindred confessions that stole to her own lips. She heard the story of Oswald's love. It did not lose in the telling, and yet it was true. Though his poetry was not of a very elevated kind, as the reader knows, it gave him a command of words, it gave him skill enough to know how that story should be told. He paused for no instant reply, but went through the record from beginning to end. Never had the girl heard such a tale. Romance, even in books, was little known to her; she had been brought up upon matters of fact; and lo, here was a romance of her own, poetry living and breathing, stealing the very heart out of Agnes's bosom. She resisted as long as she could, hiding her tears, hiding the quivering of her mouth, keeping her eyes down that no chance look might betray her; marshalling all her forces to do battle against this subtle influence. After all, those forces were not great; devotion to her work—but, alas, for weeks past the insidious foe had been undermining her walls, whispering of other duties more natural, more gracious, pointing out all the defects in that work to eyes which could not refuse to see them: regard for the prejudices of conventional life, the want of proper introduction, &c., a formidable horror to the girl's inexperienced mind, and yet with no real force in it, for had not she, too, broken the bonds of society? Eventually the strength ebbed away from her as she listened. Last of all her routed forces took refuge in the last yet frailest citadel of all—her dress. It was that, too, that Oswald had thought of. In the absence of all real objections to this mutual understanding, this little barrier of *chiffons* erected itself. How could she in that garb of self-sacrifice choose personal happiness, her own way, and all the brightnesses instead of all the sadnesses of existence? This thought gave her a little temporary strength.

'Agnes,' he said, with agitation, 'those wretched children are coming back again. I must go away unless you will acknowledge and receive me. Agnes! think; can all this go for nothing, all this chapter in our lives? Can it end and be as if it had not been! Oh, look at me! Speak to me! Don't say no with your voice. I will not believe it. Let me see your face——'

She turned to him slowly, her mouth quivering, flashes of

flying colour going and coming, her eyelids—which she could not lift—heavy with tears, every line in her face moving and eloquent with feeling. ‘What can I say?’—her voice was so low and hurried that he had to bend forward to hear her—‘in this place, in this dress. Is it right? Oh, why should you ask me? What can I say——?’

‘Look at me, Agnes!’

With an effort, as if she could not help it, she slowly lifted her eyes. There were two great tears in them, oceans of unspeakable meaning, veiling yet magnifying the truth below. One moment, and then she covered her face with her hands. There was no more to say.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE afternoon was still, softer, brighter, warmer than the morning; the wind went down, and turned into the softest puff of a caressing breeze; the white caps of the waves melted away into a delicious ripple which crisped without agitating the broad blue sunny surface of the water. Overhead a few flitting specks of white cloud sailed softly by like motes upon the unfathomable blue in which one lost one’s self when one looked up. What a day it was! and what a strange dream of happiness to be floating there, between one blue and the other, suspended in that liquid world of air between the two, with soft blessedness of motion, and delicious tinkle of sound, and caressing of the air and of the sun! It was not too warm nor too bright, nor too anything, for the two who were afloat upon that summer sea. Their boat glided along as it pleased, with a little white sail to catch the little air that was blowing; and kind fortune watched over the voyage to see that no harm came—kind fortune, or some of the younger angels who watch over true lovers—for the captain of the little craft gave but small attention to the helm. Fortunately, the sea was broad, and they were out of the way of the many vessels issuing from the Thames, the sight of which as they floated downward, with white sails wooing the breeze, or even with fussy paddle-wheels or creaking screw which defied it, added, as far as

sight could add, a certain additional charm to the blessedness of these two. They were like emblems of the race afloat upon that soft brightness at the edge of ocean, tempting the wind should it rise, tempting the waves should any storm-caprice seize them to toss the unwary dreamers into peril—but heeding nothing, taking the sweet calm and the delight of peaceful nature for granted, and making everything subsidiary to their happiness. Never had the young man known such a soft climax of happiness; never had the young girl received out of the stepdame hands of Life, so bare and spare to her hitherto, anything at all resembling this hour. It was the first taste of the elixir and cordial which makes the fainting live, and transforms all heaven and earth to the young. Happiness! we can all live without it, and most of us manage to do so very fairly; but when it comes, what a change it makes! Agnes had never known that penetrating, exquisite touch from heaven, which transcends all vulgar things. Since she had been a child, happy without knowing why, the conditions of life had not been sweet to her—flat and dreary and dull, and without fellowship, had been most of those youthful days which are so much longer than days ever are afterwards. But now! the flat preface had surely been designed by heaven on purpose to throw up into fuller loveliness this day of days. Had anyone ever been so happy before? with the sun and the sea, and the soft air, and nature, tender mother, all smiling, caressing, helping, as if there was any need to help! as if the chief fact of all was not enough to make the dullest skies and greyest space resplendent. Agnes felt herself the spoiled child of heaven. She looked up into the wonderful blue above, tears coming to her eyes and thanks into her heart. Was it not the hand of God that had turned all her life into joy and brightness—what else? when she had not been serving Him as she ought. But that was heaven's celestial way; and oh with what fervour of grateful love, with what devotion and tender zeal of thanksgiving would not she serve Him now! 'Yes!' she said, when Oswald displayed before her his pictures of happiness, and told where he would take her, how they should live, with what beautiful surroundings, amid what pleasures and sweetness and delight. 'Yes!' It was all a dream of impossible blessedness sure to come true; 'but we must still think of the poor,' she said, looking at him with those sweetest tears in her eyes. He called her all kinds of

heavenly names in the admiration of his young love—‘Angel,’ as all lovers call all beloveds; and both of them felt a touch of tender goodness in them in addition to every other blessedness. Yes! they would think of the poor; they would help all who wanted help; they would be tender, very tender, of the unhappy. Were there, indeed, still unhappy people in the world? with what awe of reverent pity these two thought of them, would have succoured them, served them on their knees! This thought served to give a kind of consecration to their own height of visionary joy.

And yet there was one little thing that disturbed them both, which was no less and no more than the cap and poke bonnet which Agnes wore. She took them off as they floated along, and threw a white handkerchief over her head, which made her look more like a Perugino than ever; and then Oswald produced out of his pocket a letter-case which he was in the habit of carrying about with him, full of verses and scraps of composition, and read to her the lines which he had gone over so often:

From old Pietro’s canvas freshly sprung
Fair face!

With what a glow of happy yet subdued brightness the fair face was illuminated as he read! Agnes, who never had written a line, had a far more poetical mind than he had, who span them by the mile. Some mysterious tide seemed to rise in her veins as the words fell on her ears. It was all poetry—the situation, the scene, the voice, the wonderful incredible joy that had come to her beyond all expectation. She sat as in a dream, but it was a dream that was true; and the sunshiny sea stretched round them, and the soft air caressed them, and the soft ripples of water tinkled against the boat with silvery delicious sound, and the sky, unfathomable, awful, yet lovely, stretched over them. They were alone, absolutely free from all interruption, and the charmed hours flew. Oswald had provisioned the boat as he could, while she went to say good-bye to her little charge, and to announce her intention of returning early to town. Agnes had eluded the kind Sisters, making a guilty pretence of having no time to see them. It was wrong, and a sense of guilt was in her heart; but the temptation was so great. He was her betrothed; there was no real *wrong* in these few sweet hours together; and he had

pleaded so anxiously, and would have been so unhappy, so much disappointed had she refused him. So nature won the day, as nature does so often, and this was the result. They ate a celestial meal together, biscuits and a little wine, which even in the happiness of the moment Oswald recognised as bad. They had floated out to the horn of the bay, and there lay moving softly with the gentle lapping of the water, wishing for no more—too happy in the moment to desire any change.

At last, however, the sunset became too apparent, attracting their notice with its low lines of gold that came into their very eyes, low as they were upon the surface of the sea. Agnes had no watch, and Oswald would not look at his. 'There is plenty of time,' he said; 'we shall get our train too soon; let us have as much of this as we can;' and Agnes assented timidly. 'So long as we make sure of our train.' 'Perhaps there may never be such a day again,' she added softly, under her breath.

'Better days, darling—hundreds of them,' he said, and then looking at her, began to repeat softly poetry which was very different from his own:—

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a nun,
Breathless with adoration: the bright sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity:
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea.

The words hushed them, their pulses being toned to all manner of fantasies. The poetry was more real than the evening, and the evening more real than anything in earth besides. And thus time glided, and the water rippled, and the sun went down, and the evening melted away.

'I am afraid we must get in now,' he said, with a start, waking up. The long summer evening had just begun to wane, the first shadow coming into it from the east. Still all was bright, a high festival of colour where the sunset had been, over the glowing sea towards the west; but from the land the first chill of grey was already afloat, that told the approach of night. There was very little wind, but that was dead against their return, and so when Oswald took to the oars was the tide, which swept him round the horn of the bay with a special force of suction which he was not acquainted with.

'All right,' he said, 'don't look frightened; we'll let ourselves drift past with the tide, and then run into the next little place. It is always a stopping train, and don't you remember we passed all those villages coming down?'

'But we did not stop,' cried Agnes, dismayed.

'The last train stops everywhere,' said the young man; 'you are not cold? Put your cloak round you; and ah, yes, the bonnet must go on again. I shall always love the bonnet. Yes, you shall keep one in your wardrobe, always; there is nothing like it. "The holy time is quiet as a nun——"'

'Oh,' she said, 'please do not think of anything but to get back; if we should miss our train——'

'Is not this worth even missing a train?' he said, still looking at her. He was rowing indeed, and at last the boat was making way; but what did he care? He was too happy to think about a train. But then, heaven help her, what was to become of *her* if this train was missed? Her face grew pale, then crimson, with the terrible thought.

'Oh, please, please! do not delay; yes, it has been delightful; but my train! What should I do? What would they say? Oh, for heaven's sake—for pity's sake!'

'If you said for love's sake—for your sake, Agnes——'

'Ah, I do!' she said, clasping her hands; and he looked at her smiling, with eyes she could scarcely meet. He rowed, it is true—yes, rowed at last with a little energy; but still smiled and talked, and would not see the anxiety that began to devour her. What was it to him? But to *her*! She looked at him with beseeching eyes.

'Yes, darling,' he said, 'yes, sweet; yes, my own!' and laughed and looked, and made her face glow with his tender eyes. It was like throwing sugar-plums at someone who was drowning. But Agnes was too much in love herself to be able to realise that this was not the best way of loving. It was very sweet, though it was almost cruel. How quickly the dusk seemed to steal on! The colour faded away bit by bit from the sky, the blue went out of the water, the wind grew a little chill—or was it only anxiety and terror that made her chill? She began to forget everything: what had happened, and even *him*, in her anxiety to get to the shore. Her brain began to swim. What would become of her? what would they say? Oswald was half affronted at last by her anxiety and silence, and swept along with long vigorous

strokes that vindicated his character as an oarsman. Agnes sprang from the boat, almost neglecting his offered hand, when at last it grated upon the beach.

'I will run to the station,' she cried, stumbling over the shingle, her heart beating, and dread in her soul. The train! the train! that was all she thought of; and oh, what would be thought of her? what had she been doing? She rushed along through the darkness, scarcely seeing where she went. Oswald had to stay behind, fuming, to settle about the boat, and engage someone to take it back. He overtook her only as she got to the station. A train was there just ready to start, about which he received rather unsatisfactory information: but she had seated herself in the dark corner of a second-class carriage before he got up to her. After a moment's pause he seated himself by her side. It was better, perhaps, at least, to get as far on as they could—to get out of the village, which was quite near enough to the Convalescent Home to permit of gossip reaching that place; and by this time Oswald was as self-reproachful as could be desired. He went and sat down beside her, penitent. It was no trouble to him to take the blame on himself at any time, and Oswald, who had been subject to much mild blame all his life, though he had never done anything very wicked, knew that to take it upon yourself was to disarm your adversaries. He adopted this facile and touching method of self-defence.

'What a brute I am!' he said; 'can you ever forgive me? to have risked your comfort, my darling, for pleasure to myself!'

'Oh no,' she said, putting her hand timidly into his, which was held out for it. It seemed clear at once to Agnes that it was her fault.

'But yes,' he said. 'I ought to have been more thoughtful. Ah, forgive me, dearest! think what the temptation was. I have never had you to myself before. The day was too sweet to end; I was too happy; but I should have thought of you.'

There was in this a subtle suggestion that she on her side had not been so happy—the delicatest shade of reproach—which Agnes could not bear.

'Oh, do not say so,' she said, 'as if I had not been—happy too.' And then they were both silent, clasping each

other's hands. 'And we have not missed it after all,' she added a moment after, with a quaver in her voice.

Oswald kept silence with a horrible misgiving. He knew, though she did not, that this was not the train she thought, and for once he was sincerely shocked and alarmed by the position he found himself in. All the way along, as the carriage rolled through the darkening twilight at a pace which seemed slow and tedious to travellers accustomed to express speed, he was trying to turn over in his mind the best thing to do, looking at her returning confidence and ease with a sense of guilt and horrible anticipations. What was to be done? There was a hope that a train which must pass the junction might be stopped by signal if this lumbering little branch would only push on its feeble engine fast enough. But if not—— The perspiration came to his forehead in great drops. He had never before in his life been so confronted by the results of his own foolishness. He ought to have attended to all the symptoms of the waning afternoon; he ought to have listened to her appeal; he ought to have thought of something else than the pleasure of the moment, and a little lengthening out of the delightful day. Heretofore some happy chapter of accidents had always delivered Oswald from the penalty of his misdoings, or at the worst it had only been himself whom he had injured. But now the creature dearest to him in the world—the one whom he had chosen out of the world—was she to suffer for his foolishness? All that was manly in him was roused by the emergency. It may be supposed he was not a very entertaining companion during the long three-quarters of an hour which it took them to reach the junction. It was almost dark, the soft dark of a summer night, when they were landed upon the desolate little platform, the sole travellers. One or two languid porters about were evidently waiting with impatience till this last disturber of their repose was cleared away. The day, which had been so deliciously fresh and sweet on the water, had been very hot inland, and the world in general was languid and anxious to be quite still and at rest.

'Wait here till I go and inquire,' he said, depositing Agnes upon a seat. To be so far on her journey quieted her. She ceased to be anxious, supposing that the arrival of the other train was a simple matter of a few minutes' delay,

and her mind floated back to the wonderful day just over, and to all the changes it would make in her life. She must tell Sister Mary Jane at once, who might shake her head perhaps, but who would be pleased, Agnes thought, having long since assured her that she had no 'vocation.' And she must go home to the Rectory, and make all known there, where, Agnes felt, there would be no great objection to parting with her, though her heart recoiled a little before all the questions, of what she thought a 'worldly' description, that would be asked. She thought, as girls of a romantic turn often do, that all the fuss of marriage would be odious, and wished she could steal away quietly, and see nobody till all was over. How sweet that would be, she thought! without any 'fuss,' without the congratulations, the visits, the curiosity, the discussions about dress—all the vulgarities of the time. She sat in the corner where Oswald had placed her, running over all this prospect in her mind, at ease, though her heart was beating still with all that had just been, and all that must so soon be—for she must tell the Sisters to-night, and to-morrow probably she would have to go home. Thus Agnes mused, not sorry to rest, but wondering a little why Oswald was so long away, and why there were no preparations for the train.

He came up to her in another minute so pale that even through the dark and dimness the girl was startled. 'Is there an accident?' she cried. He seized her hand, and drawing it through his arm, led her away hastily beyond the gaze of the porters. 'Oh, my darling!' he cried, 'oh, Agnes, what will you say to me? It is my fault, and what can I do to mend it? The train has gone.'

She gave a frightened cry, and drew her arm from his: then looked wildly up and down the lines of iron way, clasping her hands with a look first of disbelief, then of despair, that went to his heart. 'Is it true? It cannot be true. Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?' she cried.

And then, indeed, the whole horror of the position burst upon Oswald. A young woman—a young lady—in her peculiar dress remarked by everybody—left alone with him at a railway junction, night falling, no one to help them within reach, and no possibility, till the morning, of going either one way or the other, back to the Sisters at Limpet Bay, or to the House in London, or to her own home where explanations

could be made. It was nothing for him—that and a hundred escapades much worse than that would be forgiven to Oswald. But for her, what calamity worse than death, what horror of evil-speaking, was involved! He was more to be pitied than she was at the moment, for he saw all that was to be feared with a clearer vision than hers, and felt that it was all his doing. His Perugino, his angel, his bride, his (all, in one word) Agnes—to be thus exposed to the world's jeers by him! The moment was bad enough for her, realising as she did the painful interview at the House, and more still, the scolding and suspicions of her mother, to whom all must be told in her turn; and not knowing what she could do for the moment, save sit there all through the night until the first morning train should come. But it was harder upon him, who was more acquainted with the ignoble part of the world than Agnes, and knew what people might say. She went away from him, trembling and crying, and sitting down once more on the rude bench, covered her face with her hands. What was she to do? As for Oswald, though it was (as he had just said a hundred times over) the happiest day of his life, this was perhaps the most terrible moment; for the question, what he was to do, was almost more difficult than for Agnes, since all the guilt was his.

At last he went to her and stood by her, grown timid, touching her shoulder softly with his hand. 'Let me speak to you,' he said. 'Agnes—see, we are both in the same trouble, and I worse than you, for it is my fault. Darling, look here, you are going to marry me, anyhow, sooner or later. Why should not it be sooner, Agnes? Let me take you down to the inn and settle you comfortably—well, as comfortably as can be in this terrible scrape we have got into,' he went on, his heart lightening a little as he saw that she listened to him, and encouraged even by the shake of her head at his suggestion, which she was too bewildered to understand at first. 'Hush, dearest; hear me out. Then I will go up to town, and—get a licence.'

'No, no, no,' she said once more, covering her face with her hands.

'Think a moment, darling. That is how it would end, anyhow. Well, it might be banns,' said Oswald, gradually coming to the surface again, feeling his heart rise and a furtive smile come to his lips. 'Think, only. In a week or two, in

a month or two, this is what would happen, with nothing but fuss, and bother, and separation, and ceremony between. Agnes! oh, I know you are not just a girl like so many, that care for these foolish things, that like a fine wedding and all the folly of it. I will take you to the woman of the inn, and put you in her care—and I will bring my mother if you please——’

‘No, no,’ she cried. ‘Your mother! Oh, she must not hear, must not see me like this.’

‘But it is all my fault. Agnes, the licence is far the shortest way. We will go quietly up to town and be married, and then what can anyone say to us? They may say we have been silly. For my part, I think it is the wisest, by far the most sensible thing that anyone could do,’ said Oswald, getting up and up to his natural level of lightheartedness. Agnes seemed to feel her own heart sinking lower and lower as he spoke; but what was she to do?

‘There’s an inn in the village, sir, that is clean and respectable,’ said the station master, coming up. ‘And I’m sorry to disturb you, and sorry for what’s happened, but you can’t keep the lady sitting out here; and the night’s getting a bit chilly, for the dew is heavy after such a day. And we’re going to shut up,’ the man added, becoming imperative, as it were, in this postscript. Oswald asked when the first train stopped in the morning, while Agnes rose and stood by, her whole frame throbbing and thrilling. She whose life had been so calm and still, with never a shock or startling incident in it, no emergencies to call out her judgment, how was she to know now how to act in this terrible crisis which had come unexpected, without a moment’s preparation, into her life?

CHAPTER XL.

TWO—PARTED.

THIS early summer had been a time of little pleasure to any one in the Square. Everything had seemed to go wrong from the day Miss Cherry went dolefully away, crying with wonder and disappointment to think that her darling should have been so unkind to her, and her brother fallen so completely out of

her influence. Very hopefully she had come, prepared to do her duty, and sure at least of Cara's sweet society and comfort—but as she drove away from the door Miss Cherry felt that this society was over for ever. She had trusted in 'the child' from Cara's earliest days—and now the child shut up her heart, and would not, even after all she had seen with her own eyes, confide in her. She saw now how it was going to be. James would marry 'that woman,' which was the bitter name by which gentle Miss Cherry, so full of kindly charity, had been driven by suspicion to call Mrs. Meredith—and Cara would fall away from her own relations, and estrangement and doubt would take the place of affection. Oh, that we had never seen them! Miss Cherry said to herself, meaning the Meredith family generally—that 'elderly siren' who had bewitched James, and that harum-scarum son who had persuaded Cara to bind herself to him without telling her nearest relations. For Edward Miss Cherry had a certain kindness. He had been very kind—he had behaved as young men used to do (she thought), as was becoming and respectful—and he too had been disappointed and wounded by the strange secrecy of the young pair, who had no motive to make them so desirous of concealing their engagement; why should they conceal it? This was the most provoking, the most exasperating feature of all; there was no reason for concealment—the parents on either side would have been willing enough—no one would have thrown any obstacles in their way. Why had they made a mystery of it? And James?—Miss Cherry went down to the country with a sad heart. But it pained her infinitely to answer those questions which Miss Charity insisted upon having replies to. She could censure them herself in the recesses of her own bosom—but to hear others find fault with them was more than Miss Cherry could bear.

'You see I have got well without you,' Miss Charity said. 'I hope you have done as well for James and his daughter, Cherry, as nature, without any assistance, has done for me.'

'Oh, they are very well, thank you,' said Miss Cherry, with a tremor. 'Cara has a headache sometimes; but all girls have headaches—and as for James, he is in perfect health.'

'I was not thinking of his health. Is all safe about the other matter?'

‘You know, her husband died,’ said Miss Cherry, somewhat dreamily.

‘What has that to do with it? A woman without a husband has just as much need to be circumspect as a woman with one. What are you insinuating, Cherry? I don’t understand you to-day?’

‘Why should I insinuate—and what can I say? James was going away, because he could not make up his mind to give up going to her; but now—he means to stay.’

So that is it!’ said Miss Charity. She was not quite decorous in all her ways, but took the privilege of her age, and often shocked her more scrupulous niece. She uttered a sound which was not unlike a low whistle of mingled astonishment and amusement. ‘So that is what it is! These men with broken hearts are *incroyable*, Cherry. And will she have him, I wonder?’

‘Have him?’ Miss Cherry echoed, with something which from her gentle lips was like scorn. She was over severe in this case as naturally as in other cases she was over-charitable. ‘She had not seen her husband for I don’t know how many years—there cannot be any very great grief on his account. And James goes there—every night.’

‘Ah! but I wonder if they’ll care to marry,’ said the old lady—‘that’s different—I should think they would prefer not to marry—’

‘Aunt Charity! James may be weak but he is not wicked. He would not do such a thing—’

‘You are a little old maid, and you don’t know anything about it,’ cried Miss Charity, peremptorily. She was an old maid herself, to speak by the book—but she thought she did understand. Miss Cherry said nothing of her other trouble. She went and got her knitting meekly, and settled down in the old way as if she had never left the Hill. Well! it was home, and this was her natural life—but when her old aunt, who was now quite strong again, went briskly out to the garden to look after the flowers and her gardener, Miss Cherry let her hands fall into her lap, and felt the stillness penetrate to her soul. The troubles of the Square, the commotions and displeasures, Cara who would not open her heart—saucy Oswald who smiled in her face and defied her—poor Edward with his disappointment, and even James, who according to all appearance was going to marry again;—how angry she had been with

them ! how she had felt their different faults, crying to herself bitterly over them,—and yet how she missed them ! That was life—this—this was *home*—which was quite a different thing. It was very wicked of her, very ungrateful to God who had given her such a lovely house, such a good kind aunt, nobody to trouble or disturb her ; very ungrateful, very wicked. Had she not everything that heart could desire ? and peace and quiet to enjoy it. Miss Cherry acknowledged all this—and cried. How still it was ! nothing moving, nothing happening—and yet, ungrateful woman, to be so well off and not to appreciate it ! What could she wish for more ?—indeed, Mrs. Burchell thought that she had a great deal too much, and that it was sinful for an unmarried woman without a family to be so well off as Miss Cherry was.

Meantime Cara, left alone in the Square, fell into all the melancholy of her beginning. Oswald still came to see her from time to time in the morning, confiding to her all the steps of his progress, and receiving sometimes her sympathy, sometimes reproof, sometimes what they both called ‘advice.’ Though she had very good cause to be angry with him, yet it was very difficult to be angry with Oswald—for though he was so self-regarding, he was too light-hearted to be stigmatised with the harsher quality of selfishness. It came to the same thing often, but yet the name seemed too harsh. And he was Cara’s only friend. She had not had time to form many acquaintanceships, and she was too shy to go by herself to return the calls, or even to accept the invitations of the people she did know. How was she to go anywhere ? Her father took no interest, asked no questions—and Mrs. Meredith was no longer the confidant of everything that happened, to arrange all for her. Therefore she refused the invitations, and shrank more and more into her corner. Between her and Mrs. Meredith a great gulf had risen. Who had caused it or what had caused it no one could tell—but there it lay, separating them, causing embarrassment when they met, and driving them daily further and further apart. Mrs. Meredith was angry with Cara as Miss Cherry was. She saw no sense, no meaning, in the concealment which she too believed in ; and it had done a positive wrong to Edward, who never, she felt sure, would have permitted himself to go so far had the position been definitely settled. Edward had resumed his work with greater energy than ever. He was going forward now for his final

examination, after which very little interval was left. His mother could not think of it without tears. One of her two boys was thus lost to her—the half of her fortune so to speak, and more than the half, for Edward had gradually assumed all the kindly offices which Oswald had been too much self-occupied to undertake—and it was all Cara's fault. Thus they blamed each other, not saying a word except in their own hearts—as women will do, I suppose, till the end of time. Mrs. Meredith would have allowed, had you pressed her, that Oswald too was wrong; but in her heart she never thought of his fault, only of Cara's. It was Cara who had done it—a little frankness on her part, natural confidence in one who was to be her mother, and who was so willing (Mrs. Meredith said to herself with genuine feeling) to accept that office, and care for the child and her comforts; how much evil might have been avoided had Cara possessed this quality, so winning in young people! Then Oswald would have been drawn closer to, instead of separated as he now seemed, from his family—then Edward would have checked himself in time, and his thoughts would have travelled in some other direction. All Cara's fault! With a real ache in her heart at the thought of the mischief done, this was what the elder woman thought. So that when Cara withdrew, wounded, and sad, and angry at the position in which she found herself, Mrs. Meredith made no effort to call her from her retirement. She was full of many reflections and questions of her own—and surely it was the part of the children to inform her of everything, to seek her consent, to conciliate her, not hers to do all this to them.

As for Edward he went no more to the house in which he had spent so many happy hours. Looking back at them now, how happy they seemed! No cloud seemed to have been on his sky when he sat there by the light of Cara's lamp, reading to her, seeing her through all his reading, feeling the charm of her presence. In reality they had been full of very mingled pleasure, and often the bitterness involved had overbalanced the sweetness; but he did not remember that now that they were past—they seemed to have been all happiness, a happiness lost for ever. He made up for the loss, which seemed to have impoverished his whole life, by work. Fortunately he had lost ground which had to be recovered now, if he was to carry out his original intention about India—and he gave himself up to this with something like passion. All the evening

through, in those hours which he used to spend with Cara, he worked, deadening himself, stupefying himself with this like a narcotic, exciting his brain to take the part of a counter-irritant against his heart. Now and then, if the poor young fellow paused for a moment, a sudden softness would steal over him, a recollection of the room next door with Miss Cherry counting her stitches on the other side of the fire—and the soft rose-reflection on Cara's white dress. How could he defend himself against these remembrances? All at once, while his eyes were fixed on his book, this scene would come before him, and lines of exasperating verse would tingle through him—reminding him of Elaine, and how she 'loved him with that love that was her doom.' Thus some malicious spirit played upon the boy—

I loved you and my love had no return,
And therefore my true love has been my death.

No, he thought with a faint half-smile, it would not be his death. If such things happened once they did not happen now. It was not so easy to die. A man had got to live and make the best of it—to forget what was so near to him, yet so unattainable, and fix his thoughts on law-cases instead. This was the modern form of tragedy. To go and work, and to live, and do as other men did—yet never be as other men. Who does not know the poignant yet sweet misery that is in that thought: never to be as other men—to carry the wound all through one's life—to be struck with a delicate arrow which would vibrate in the wound for ever! And then, with renewed zeal, he would plunge into his work. What notes he made, what reports he drew out, digests of the dreariest books, accounts of the dullest trials! I think he liked the dullest best; anything that was interesting, anything that had any humanity in it, seemed by some strange by-path or other to take him back to Cara. Poor boy! and then, when it suddenly occurred to him that Cara was alone on the other side of the wall, the book would fall out of his hand or the pen from his fingers. She was alone as he was alone. Oswald, who ought to bear her company, was away somewhere following his own fancies—her aunt was gone—and her father was *here*. Then Edward trembled in mind and in body, under the force of the temptation to go to her, to cheer her, whatever might happen to him. He seemed to see her, lonely in a

corner. She had not even work to do as he had, to force her from herself. How the poor boy's heart would beat!—but then—if she were his he knew he would not fear solitude, nor dislike having nothing to do—to think of her would keep him happy; and perhaps if she loved Oswald as Edward loved her—— This thought stung him back to his work again with greater energy than ever. Most likely she loved her solitude, which was sweet with recollections. Then there would break through all his law and all his labour a violent hot pulse of resentment. For Oswald's sake!—who went wandering about, gay and light-hearted, from club to club, from dinner to dinner, and had not so much gratitude, so much decency, as to give one evening out of a dozen to her!

But Cara, as the reader knows, had not the consolation with which Edward credited her. Happiness of all kinds, she thought, had deserted her for ever. There was not even a fire to keep her company, to make her an imitation of a companion. If one could choose the time to be unhappy, it would be always best in winter, when one can cower over the glow of the fire, and get some comfort out of the warmth. It was like stealing away her last friend from her to take away her fire. When she sat in her usual place the dark fire-place seemed to glare at her like a kind of grave. And when she sat at the window, all the evening lights got into her eyes and drew tears, so sweet were they and wistful, even though it was but a London sky. Cara had once read a foolish little poem somewhere, in which the twilight was embodied in the form of a poor girl looking stealthily in at the open windows, to look for her lost lover, and sighing when she could not find him. At her age allegory is still beautiful—and the very dimness shadowed into visionary form about her, looking for something—for what? for happiness, that was lost and could not be found again, never could be found. She did not think any longer as she had done at first, with a half-superstitious tremor, of her mother who might be about, looking at her with anxious spiritual eyes, unable to make herself known. It was a lower level of thought upon which the girl had fallen; she had strayed from the high visionary ground, and had begun to think of herself. She wanted someone near, some voice, some touch, some soft words breaking the stillness; but these sweetnesss were not for her. By turns she too would study like Edward; but then she had no occasion to study, there was no bond of duty

upon her. She read Elaine over again, poring over her book in the twilight, which was a congenial light to read by, and the same words which pursued Edward went thrilling through her also like the note of a nightingale floating through the dark—'Loved him with that love that was her fate'—but how fortune favoured Elaine ! what an end was hers ! whereas there was nothing wonderful about poor little Cara, only a foolish mistake which she could not set right, which nobody cared enough about her to set right, and which must mar her whole life without remedy. The house was quite still as it had been before Miss Cherry came—but worse than that ; for then there was no imbroglio, no web of falsehood about her poor little feet. Things had grown worse and worse for her as the days went on. She wrote little formal letters to the Hill saying that she and papa were quite well. She went out to take a walk every day with nurse, and according to the orders of that authority. She asked cook what there was to be for dinner, and agreed to it whatever it was. She made her father's coffee in the morning, and was very quiet, never disturbing him, saying Yes or No, when he asked her any question—and sat at the other end of the table when he dined at home. He thought she was a very good little girl—not so clever as he had expected ; but children so often grow up different from their promise—a very good little girl of the old-fashioned type, made to be seen and not heard. He had never been used to her, and did not require his child to sympathise with him or amuse him as some men do—and his mind was full of other things. It did occur to him as the summer went on that she was pale—'I think you ought to see Maxwell, Cara,' he said ; 'you are looking very colourless ; write a little note, and ask him to come to put you to-rights.'

'I am quite well, papa—I don't want Mr. Maxwell or anyone.'

'Well, if you are sure—but you look pale ; I will speak to Mrs. Meredith, and see what she thinks.' Cara felt a sensation of anger at this suggestion. She denied again with much earnestness that there was anything the matter with her—and though the heat of her reply almost roused her father to real consideration, it did not after all go quite so far as that. He went to his library, and she to her drawing-room. The morning was the cheerful time of her day. It was the hour for Oswald, who came in quite pleasantly excited, and

told her of the expedition he was going to make into the country on the chance of having an interview and explanation with his Agnes. Cara thought this was a very good thing to do. 'She ought to know exactly what you feel about her,' she said; 'and oh, Oswald, you ought to tell everybody, and make an end of all these mysteries.'

'That is one word for her and two for yourself, Cara,' he said, laughing; 'you want to be free of me. But no, wait just a little longer. Look here, I will send you the *Vita Nuova*, and there you will see that Dante had a screen to keep people from suspecting that it was Beatrice.'

'I will not be your screen,' said Cara, with energy; 'it is wicked of you to speak so.'

'Why, it is in the *Vita Nuova*!' said Oswald, with indignant innocence; 'but never mind, it will be over directly; and you shall come and see her, and help us. My mother must come too.'

'I am glad of that. I am sure that Mrs. Meredith would go to-day if you were to ask her.'

'Not to-day, let us get our holiday first. I want to see her blush and her surprise as she sees me—but after that you shall see how good and reasonable and correct I shall be.'

He went away smiling. It was June, and the very atmosphere was a delight. He had brightened Cara for the moment, and she stepped out upon the balcony and breathed the sweet air, which was sweet even there. Oswald thought she was looking after him as he walked away, and was flattered by Cara's affection—and other people thought so too. As she looked down into the Square she caught the eyes of Edward who had just come out, and who took it for granted that this was a little overflowing of tenderness on her part, a demonstration of happy love. He looked up at her almost sternly she thought, but he did not mean it so. He had grown pale and very serious these last few weeks. And he took off his hat to her without a word. Cara went in again as if she had received a blow. She covered her face with her hands and cried. Oh, if it really was in the *Vita Nuova*! Cara hoped the lady who was the screen for Beatrice did not feel it as she did—and what did it matter?—that lady, whoever she was, must have been dead for hundreds of years. But *she* was alive, and this falsehood embittered her whole life.

CHAPTER XLI.

TWO—TO BE ONE?

JAMES BERESFORD was full of perturbation and troubled thoughts as well as his child. The romance of middle age is more difficult to manage than that of youth. It is less simple, less sure of its own aim; indeed, it has so often no aim at all, but cherishes itself for itself disinterestedly, as youthful sentiment never does. The death of Mr. Meredith had exercised a great, but at first undefined, influence on Mr. Beresford's affairs. He was as good as told by everybody that there was now no reason for putting restrictions upon his friendship and intercourse with Mrs. Meredith, a thing which had been demanded of him as his duty a little while before; and he had accepted this assurance as an immediate relief, and had gladly fallen back into the old habits in which had lain so much of the comfort of his life. And he could not have left his friend, who had been so much to him in his trouble at this moment of distress for her. But there was something in the air which made him conscious of a change. He could not tell what it was; no one said anything to him; his own feelings were unaltered; and yet it was not the same. He evaded making any inquiry with himself into what had happened for some time; but the question was not to be evaded for ever; and gradually he gleaned from all sides—from looks and significant words, and a hundred little unexpressed hints, that there was but one thing expected by everybody—and that was, with all the speed consistent with decency, a marriage between himself and his neighbour. Everybody took it for granted that the death of her husband was 'a special providence' to make two good people happy; and that poor Mr. Meredith (though probably he had no such benevolent intention) could not have done a kinder thing than to take himself out of the way at this particular moment. There was not one of their mutual friends who did not think so; no one blamed the pair whose friendship was supposed to have fallen into 'a warmer feeling' in the most innocent way, without any intention of theirs; and who were ready to make the necessary sacrifice to propriety as soon as they found it out. What so natural as that this should have happened? An attractive and charming woman left in the position of a widow, year after year, by her

uncongenial husband—and an intellectual, accomplished man, left alone in the prime of life, to whom in kindness she had opened her doors. Some people had shaken their heads, but everybody allowed that there was but one end to such an intimacy. And it was very seldom that anything so convenient happened in the world as the death of the husband so absolutely in the nick of time. Of course what would happen now was clear to the meanest apprehension. Probably being, as they were, excellent people both, and full of good feeling, they would wait the full year and show ‘every respect’ to the dead man who had been so considerate of them; but that, at that or an earlier period, Mrs. Meredith would become Mrs. Beresford, was a thing that everyone felt convinced of, as sure as if it had already taken place.

It would be difficult to tell how this general conviction forced itself upon James Beresford’s mind. The efforts which had to be made to send him away awoke him to a startled sense that his intimacy with his neighbour was regarded by his friends under a strange and uncomfortable light; and he had yielded to their efforts with no small agitation on his own part, and a sense of pain and desolation which made him ask himself whether they were right. Probably had he gone away, and Mrs. Meredith been forcibly separated from him, an unlawful object of affection, he would have ended by believing that they were right, and that the consolation and comfort and pleasures of his intercourse with her had grown into ‘a warmer feeling.’ But now that Mr. Meredith was well out of the way, and even the excitement attending his end over, he was by no means so clear in his mind, and the subject became one of great trouble and complication. Somehow it seems always possible, always within the modesties of nature even to the least vain of men, or women, that some other, any other, may regard him (or her) with a specially favourable eye. No one does wrong in loving us, nor are we disposed to blame them for it. So that there was perhaps a time in which Mr. Beresford took his friends’ opinion for granted, and was not unprepared to believe that perhaps Mrs. Meredith would be happy in being his wife; and that, in his state of mind, was a final argument against which nothing could be said. But lately he had begun to doubt this; his coming did not clear away the clouds that had invaded her brows. She would strike into sudden talk

about Edward and his going away, when her friend with much delicacy and anxiety was endeavouring to sound her feelings. She seemed unconscious of his investigation—her mind was pre-occupied. Sometimes, on the other hand, she would betray a certain uneasiness, and change the subject in a way that betrayed her consciousness; but that was only when her mind was quite free. From the time when she began to have a grievance, an anxiety of her own, she escaped from the most cautious wiles of his scrutiny. She was more occupied by thoughts of her son than by thoughts of him. Was this consistent with *love*? Poor James Beresford, feeling that this would decide him in a moment could he know, one way or another, what her feelings were, was thus thrown out and forced to fall back upon his own.

And what were his own?—A maze of conflicting ideas, wishes, prejudices, and traditions of old affection. There was nothing in the world he would not have given up cheerfully rather than lose this sweet friend—this consoler and sympathiser in all his troubles. But he did not want her to be his wife. His Annie, it might be, had faded into a distant shadow; but that shadow represented to him a whole world past and over—the world of love and active, brilliant, joyous happiness. His nature, too, had fallen into the shadows—he did not want that kind of happiness now; one passion had been enough for him; he wanted a friend, and that he had—he did not want anything more. And the idea of disturbing all the unity of his life by a second beginning gave him a smart shock. Can a man have more wives than one?—Can he have more lives than one?—He was a fanciful man, of fastidious mind, and with many niceties of feeling such as ruder minds called fantastic. He shrank from the thought of banishing from his house even the shadow and name of her who was gone. To be sure if he could make up his mind that *she* wished it, all these resolutions would have gone to the winds; and it is very likely that he would have been very happy—happier than he could ever be otherwise. But then he could not make her feelings out. Would she go visibly away from him, even while he was sitting by her, into her troubles about Edward—eyes and heart alike growing blank to him, and full of her boy—if she had given to him a place above her boys in her affections? Surely no. I would not even assert that there was not the slightest possible suspicion

of pique in this conclusion, for the man would have been flattered to know that the woman loved him, even though he was conscious that he did not so regard her. But 'the warmer feeling' of which all their friends were so sure, of which everybody concluded that it had grown unconsciously *en tout bien et tout honneur* out of that friendship which the world holds to be impossible between man and woman—was just the one thing about which the principal person concerned could have no certainty at all. He knew what the friendship was—it was almost life to him; it was his strongest support—his best consolation; it was the only thing that could make a second, a kind of serious sweet successor, to the love that was never to come again; but it was not that love—certainly not in his heart—so far as he could make out, not in hers either; but who could tell? Weak man! he would rather have preferred that she should have felt differently, and that it should have been his duty to marry for her sake.

His life had settled down into all its old lines since Mr. Meredith's death. He had his business about the societies—his meetings—his lectures to arrange—sometimes his articles to write. Now and then he dined out in the best and most learned of company. He was pointed out to the ignorant when he went into society as a distinguished person. He was in the front of the age, knowing a great deal more than most people knew, doing things that few people could do. His mornings were spent in these refined and dignified occupations; and when he dined out with his remarkable friends, or when he dined at home with only his silent little girl to keep him company, as regularly as the clock struck he knocked at the next door, and had his hour of gentle talk, of mutual confidence. They knew all about each other, these two; each could understand all the allusions the other made—all the surrounding incidents in the other's life. They talked as man and wife do, yet with a little element of unconvention, of independence, of freshness in the intercourse, which made it more piquant than that between man and wife. What could be more agreeable, more desirable, more pleasant? But to break off all this delightful ease of intercourse by some kind of antiquary courtship, by the fuss of marriage, by fictitious honeymooning, and disturbance of all their formed and regular habits of life,—what nonsense it would be—and all

for the sake of their friends, not of themselves! But if *she* should wish it, of course that would give altogether another character to the affair.

This was what Mr. Beresford at last made up his mind to ascertain boldly one way or another. It was about the same time as Oswald, approaching the railway junction, was turning over his dilemma and seeing no way out of it. Mr. Beresford had been hearing a lecture, and was in a chastened state of mind. He had been hearing about the convulsions of the early world, and by what means the red-hot earth cooled down and settled itself, after all manner of heavings and boilings, into something of the aspect it wears. As he walked home he dwelt upon the wonderful grandeur of such phenomena. What did it matter, after all, what happened to a few small insignificant persons on the crust which had formed over all these convulsions? What of their little weepings and lovings and momentary struggles, to one who could study such big and mighty strainings of force against force? A little while at the most, and the creatures who made so much fuss about their feelings would be a handful of dust; but volcanic action would go on for ever. Notwithstanding this philosophy, however, it must be allowed that, whereas he had heard of these convulsions with the calmest bosom, his heart began to beat as he approached Mrs. Meredith's door. If the moon had tumbled out of the sky, or a boiling caldron suddenly revealed itself in the earth, so long as it was at a safe distance, even Mr. Beresford, who was so fond of science, would not have cared a tenth part so much about it as he did to know what his neighbour meant; which was inconsistent, but natural perhaps. The philosophy went out of his head as he approached the door. Little fusses of loving and of liking—momentary cross-lights, or, let us say, flickering farthing candles of human sentiment—what are they to the big forces that move the world? Is not a bit of chalk more interesting than all your revolutions and changes?—your petty sufferings, passions, heroisms, and the like? Mr. Beresford thought he believed all that—yet, heaven above! how calm he was when the chalk was under consideration, and how much perturbed when he went up the steps of the house next door!

‘You have been out to-night?’

'Yes, I have been hearing Robinson—a remarkably interested, intelligent audience. Where are the boys? Edward should come—it would interest him.'

'Edward is always at work. He is killing himself for this examination. I wish he could be interested in something less serious. Oswald has been away all day. I think he said he was going to the country. If we could only mix them up a little,' said the mother, with an anxious smile—'to one a little more gravity, to the other a little more of his brother's light-heartedness.'

Mr. Beresford did not say anything about the superior interest of volcanic action, as he might, nay, perhaps ought, to have done. He said instead, in the feeblest way, 'That will come as they get older. You must give them time.'

Mrs. Meredith did not say anything. She shook her head, but the faint smile on her face remained. There was nothing tragical yet about either one or the other. Mr. Beresford was less calm than usual. He sat down and got up again; he took up books and threw them away; he fidgeted about the room from one point to another. At last even Mrs. Meredith's composure gave way. She jumped to one of those sudden conclusions which foolish women who are mothers are so apt to think of. It suddenly rushed upon her mind that some accident had happened to Oswald, and that Mr. Beresford had been sent to her to break the news.

'You are put out,' she said; 'something has happened. Oh, tell me—something about the boys? Oswald!'

'Nothing of the sort,' he said. 'Don't think it for a moment! The boys are perfectly well, I hope. I was going to ask you an odd sort of question, though,' he added, with an awkward smile, rushing into the middle of the subject. 'Did it never occur to you that you would be the better for having someone to help you with the boys?'

Now, there could not have been a more foolish question—for until a very short time back the boys' father had been in existence—and since then, there had been no time for the widow to take any such step. She looked at him with much surprise. 'Someone to help me? Whom could I have to help me? Their poor dear father was too far away!'

'Ah! I forgot their father,' said Mr. Beresford, with naïve innocence, and then there was a pause. He did not know how to begin again after that very evident downfall. 'I mean,

however, as a general question,' he added, 'what do you think? Should you approve of a woman in your own position—marrying, for instance—for her children's sake?'

'That is a curious question,' she said, with a little laugh; but the surprise brought the colour into her face. 'I suppose it would depend on the woman. But I don't know,' she added, after a moment, 'how a woman could put her children into any stranger's—any *other* man's hands.'

'Ah, a stranger! perhaps I did not mean a stranger.'

'I don't think you know what you meant,' she said, with a smile; but there was some terror in her eyes. She thought she knew what was coming. She was like him in her own sentiments, and still more like him in her speculations about himself. She had been brought to believe that he loved and wanted to marry her. And, if it could not be otherwise, she felt that she must consent; but she did not wish it any more than he did. However, while he thought the best policy was to find out what ought to be done at once, she was all for putting off, avoiding the consideration, trusting in something that might turn up. Mr. Beresford, however, had wound himself up to this interview, and was not to be put off.

'Between people of our sober years such questions may be discussed—may they not?' he said. 'I wonder what *you* think really? There is nothing I so much wish to know—not the conventional things that everybody says—but what *you* think. You have been my other conscience for so long,' he added, jesuitically, in order to conceal the cunning with which he was approaching the subject—asking for her opinion without specifying the subject on which he wanted it.

But she saw through him, with a little amusement at the artifice employed. He wanted to know what she thought without asking her. Fortunately, the being asked was the thing *she* wanted to avoid. But, just when they had got to this critical point, Edward came upstairs. He was not friendly, as he had been to his mother's friend; he came in with the gloom upon his face, and a look of weariness. Mr. Beresford heard the door open with great impatience of the newcomer, whoever it might be. Nothing could be more inopportune. He wished Edward in Calcutta or wherever else it might be best for him to be on the other side of the seas. But, as for Mrs. Meredith, her attention fled on the moment to her boy. She forgot her friend and his question.

ing, and even the delicate position which she had realised, and the gravity of the relations which might ensue. All this went out of her mind in comparison with Edward's fatigued look. She got up and went to him, putting her hand very tenderly upon his shoulder.

'You have been working too long, dear. Oh, Edward, don't be so anxious to get away from me! You are working as if this was your dearest wish in the world.'

'So it is,' he said; 'not to leave you, mother; but to feel that I am doing something, not merely learning or enjoying myself.'

'Edward is quite right,' said Mr. Beresford. 'It is by far the most worthy feeling for a young man.'

But Edward did not take this friendly support in a good spirit; he darted a half-savage glance at his backer-up.

'Oh, if you take it in that light, that is not what I meant,' he said. 'I am not of that noble strain. It is not pure disinterestedness. I think it is a pity only to lose one's advantages, and I should have some advantages of connection and that sort of thing. At least, I suppose so; and it is what is called a fine career.'

'Yes, it is a fine career.'

'If it is fine to separate yourself from all you care for in the world,' cried Mrs. Meredith, 'from all who care for you—not only must we be left behind, but when you have got beyond me, when you have a family of your own——'

'Which I never shall have, mother.'

'Nonsense! boys and girls say so, and end just like others; even your own, your very own must be taken from you. You must give up everything—and you call that a fine career.'

'Men do, if women don't,' said the young man, not looking at her. His heart was so wrung and sore that he could not keep the gloom off his face.

'And you don't care what women think? You might have put off that lesson till you were a little older. At your age what your mother thinks should surely be something to you still.'

He gave her a look which was full of pain. Was that what he was thinking? Was he sure to care little for what women thought? 'You know better, mother,' he said harshly. He was all rubbed the wrong way—thwarted, wearied, unhappy.

'I only came for a book,' he continued, after a moment, picking up the first one he got hold of, and then, with a little nod to the visitor, went upstairs again. What did that visitor want here? Why did he leave his own house, and Cara alone—poor Cara!—whom nobody loved as Edward did? It would be a great deal better for Mr. Beresford if he would stay at home. After this little episode Edward sat down stubborn and unyielding to his work again. What did it matter if a man was happy or unhappy? He had his day's work to get through all the same.

'Don't think him harsh. I am afraid my boy is not quite happy,' said Mrs. Meredith, with tears in her eyes.

'That is nothing,' he said. 'I am not a friend of yesterday; but he came in when we were talking——'

'Ah, yes,' she said, but her eyes were still full of Edward; 'what was it we were talking about?'

'I am afraid if you say that, it is sufficient answer to my question,' said Mr. Beresford, more wounded than he could have supposed possible; for he wanted to be first with her, though he did not wish it in the vulgar way that was supposed.

'You are not to be angry,' she said, with a deprecating look, laying her hand softly on his arm; 'you must not be hard upon me. When they are boys we wish them to be men, but anxiety grows with their growth; and now I think sometimes I should be glad to have them boys again.'

'Boys, boys!' he exclaimed, with natural impatience, 'is that all you think of? Yet there are other interests in the world.'

'How selfish I am!' she cried, rousing herself suddenly. 'That is true. You must forgive me; but I am so used to talk to you of everything, whatever is in my heart.'

This melted him once more. 'Yes,' he said, 'we talk to each other of everything; we have no secrets between us. There is nothing in the world I would not do for you, nor you, I think, for me. Do you know what people are thinking about you and me? They think that being so near we should be nearer; that we might help one another better. That was what I wanted to ask you. Don't you think it is so?'

He wanted her to commit herself first, and she was willing enough that he should commit himself, but not that she

should. She was embarrassed, yet she met his eyes with a half smile.

‘I think it is not a case for heeding what people think. Are we not very well as we are? How could we be better than as fast friends—friends through fire and water?’

‘That we should always be,’ he said, grasping her hand, ‘that we should always be; and yet without becoming less we might be more. Speak to me frankly, dear; you know all my heart. Do not you think so too?’

CHAPTER XLII.

A GREAT REVOLUTION.

NOTWITHSTANDING the directness of this questioning, it was by no means a direct reply which Mr. Beresford got from Mrs. Meredith. It was not a refusal, but neither was it a consent. ‘Let us not do anything rashly,’ and ‘I think we are very well as we are,’ was what she said, and yet the change was certainly a step nearer accomplishment now that the possibility of it had been mentioned between them. He had grown rather earnest in pressing the expediency of this step as soon as the ice was fairly broken, and had been piqued by her reluctance into more warmth than he had expected himself to feel. Nevertheless, when he came back to his own house, uncomfortable matters of detail came into Mr. Beresford’s mind, and annoyed him more than he could have believed, more than they were worth. About the houses, for instance; if this happened, they could not go on living next door to each other. Would she come to his, or should he go to hers?—if indeed the matter came to anything. This bothered him, and suggested many other details—changes of habit which would bother him still more. Altogether it was a troublesome business. He liked her best in her own drawing-room; but then he liked himself much best in his own library, and there were moments in which he felt disposed to denounce the fool who had first thought of any change. All things considered, how much better it would have been that they should remain as they were! but that was no longer to be thought of. How was he to tell Cara? How was she to

tell her boys, upon whom she was so much more dependent than he was upon Cara? If the boys disapproved strenuously, then Mr. Beresford felt it would come to nothing after all; and in that case how much better to have said nothing! for he felt that he would not like to stand in the position of a man refused. So that altogether this middle-aged romance was not without its troubles; troubles—as, for instance, that about the houses—which you may laugh at if you please, but which involved much more personal embarrassment and inconvenience, you will allow, than many of the sentimental difficulties which you are ready to weep over in the romances of the young.

Mrs. Meredith was kept in some uneasiness also by the fact that Oswald did not return that night. The servants sat up for him, and lights burned all night in the house, affronting the dawn which came so early; but he did not appear. This was not at all usual; for Oswald, though he liked his own way, and was frivolous enough, had never been dissipated in the ordinary sense of that word; and what made it more unpleasant still was the fact that next day was Sunday, and that no communication either by telegram or letter was possible. This fact drove everything else out of Mrs. Meredith's head. When James Beresford went to her, she could talk of nothing but Oswald; where he could have gone, how he might have been detained. That he had not sent them any news of his movements was easily explained. Sunday! 'I would not say a word against Sunday,' said poor Mrs. Meredith, who went to church dutifully as Sunday came; 'but, oh! when one is anxious, when there is no post and no telegraph, what a day!' They were all telling her how easily explainable Oswald's absence was; and when they stopped explaining it to her, she herself would take up the parable, and protest that she knew exactly how it must have happened. It was all as clear as daylight. He had been detained by his friends whoever they might happen to be, or he had lost the last train. It was Oswald's way to lose the last train, and no one had asked where he was going when he said he was going to the country. And, of course, it had been too late to telegraph on Saturday night, and how was he to know, a boy of his late habits, that the telegraph offices were open early on Sunday morning? All these explanations were most plausible—the worst of such things, however, is that, plausible as they

are, they satisfy nobody. But it annoyed Mr. Beresford immensely to find that Oswald's unexpected absence took up all Mrs. Meredith's thoughts. She had no leisure for him, though surely he ought to have been at least as important as Oswald. Whatever he talked to her about, she replied to him with something about her boy. As if her boy could have come to any harm! as if it was not all his own levity and selfishness! Mr. Beresford, having an object of his own to pursue, was quite indignant with and impatient of Oswald. What was he, a frivolous do-nothing unsatisfactory young man, that so much fuss should be made about *him*? He was one of 'the boys'—what more could be said? and how unsatisfactory the best of women were when this motive came into play! Cara never thus distracted her father's mind; he did not think of her. To be sure she was a girl, and girls never get into scrapes. He did not quite like, it is true, the task of opening this question, of which his mind was full, to Cara. He thought, perhaps, that when all was settled, *she* (meaning Mrs. Meredith) might do it. Women know best how to deal with girls; but to make Cara, whatever might happen to her, into a hindrance of other intercourse, into an obstacle which stopped everything, that was not a weakness of which he would be capable. Mr. Beresford did not scoff at women; it was not a sentiment congenial to him; but still he had a feeling that in this respect the comparative strength and weakness of male and female character was certainly shown. But he would not say so rudely. He was obliged to submit.

On Monday morning a telegram did come from Oswald. He had been detained; would write to explain, but did not expect to get home till Thursday or Friday; please send portmanteau to Cloak-room, Clapham Junction. 'Do any of his friends live in that quarter?' Mrs. Meredith asked Edward, with astonishment. 'He has friends everywhere,' said Edward, with a half sigh. This pleased the mother, though he had not said it with such an intention. Yes, he had friends everywhere. He was a harum-scarum boy, too careless perhaps, but everywhere, wherever he went, he had friends; and the portmanteau was sent, and the letter of explanation waited for—but it did not come. In short, the week had nearly run round again without any news of him, and everything else was arrested, waited for Oswald's reappearance. Mrs. Meredith

evaded all recurrence to the more important subject by constantly falling back upon Oswald—perhaps she was rather glad of the chance of escape it gave her—and Mr. Beresford was no nearer a settlement than ever. This fretted him, and put him in a sort of secondary position which he did not like, but which it was useless to struggle against; and so the days and the hours went on.

It was the Friday when two visitors almost at the same moment approached the two adjoining houses in the Square, both of them with faces full of seriousness, and even anxiety. One of them was Mr. Maxwell in his brougham, who sprang out with a kind of nervous alacrity unusual to him, and knocked at Mrs. Meredith's door. The other was a solid and portly clergyman, who got out of a four-wheeled cab, paying his fare with a careful calculation of the distance which produced bad language from his driver, and knocked at Mr. Beresford's. They were admitted about the same moment, and received in the two corresponding rooms with nothing but a wall between them; and both of them had very serious business in hand. Cara's visitor was Mr. Burchell, from the Rectory, who asked, with a countenance full of strange things, and with many apologies, whether Miss Beresford had lately seen 'our Agnes.' Agnes! the name made Cara start.

'I have not seen anyone but Roger since I left the Hill. I hope he—I mean all, are well. Is Agnes in town, Mr. Burchell?' Agnes was four or five years older than Cara, and therefore out of her sphere.

'I thought your aunt would certainly have mentioned it to you; indeed, Mrs. Burchell was much surprised that she did not see her when she was in town. Agnes has been in—an educational establishment for some time. We are a little anxious about her,' said the Rector, with a quaver in his voice.

'Is she ill?' Cara did not love the clergyman under whom she had sat for ten years, but her heart was touched by that unmistakable trembling in his commonplace voice.

'I don't suppose she is ill; we—don't know. The fact is she left—the House last Saturday—and has never come back. We don't know what has become of her,' he said, with real trouble. 'You won't mention it to anyone. Oh, I suppose it is nothing, or something quite easily explainable; but her mother is anxious—and I thought you might have seen her. It is nothing, nothing of any real consequence,' he added, trying to

smile, but with a quiver in his lips. He was stout and commonplace and indeed disagreeable, but emotion had its effect upon him as well as another, and he was anxious about his child. He looked Cara wistfully in the face, as if trying to read in the lines of it something more than she would allow.

‘Agnes! the House—O Mr. Burchell!’ said Cara, waking up suddenly to a full sense of all that was in the communication. ‘Do you mean to say that it was Agnes—*Agnes!* that was the Agnes in the House?’

Mr. Maxwell was more uncertain how to open the object of his visit. He sat for some time talking of *la pluie et le beau temps*. He did not know how to begin. Then he contrived little traps for Mrs Meredith, hoping to bring her to betray herself, and open a way for him. He asked about Cara, then about Mr. Beresford, and how he heard he had given up all ideas of going away. But, with all this, he did not produce the desired result, and it was necessary at last, unless he meant to lose his time altogether, to introduce his subject broadly without preface. He did so with much clearing of his throat.

‘I have taken rather a bold thing upon me,’ he said. ‘I have thought it my duty—I hope you will forgive me, Mrs. Meredith. I have come to speak to you on this subject.’

‘On what subject?’ she said simply, with a smile.

This made it more difficult than ever. ‘About you and Mr. Beresford,’ he said, abruptly blurting it out. ‘Don’t be offended, for heaven’s sake! You ought to have known from the first; but I can’t let you walk blindly into—other relations—without letting you know.’

‘Doctor, I hope you are not going to say anything that will make a breach between us,’ said Mrs. Meredith. ‘You have no right to suppose that I am about to form other relations—I only a few months a widow! I hope I have done nothing to forfeit my friends’ respect.’

‘Then I am not too late,’ he said, with an air of relief. ‘There is still time! I am very glad of that. Respect—*forfeit your friends’ respect?* who could suppose such a thing? You have only too much of your friends’ respect. We would all go through fire and water for you.’

‘Thanks, thanks,’ she said; ‘but you must not let me be gossiped about,’ she added, after a moment, which made the doctor, though he was not of a delicate countenance, blush.

'That is all very well,' he said, 'but those who have so many friends, and friends so warmly interested, must expect a little talk. It has been spoken of, that there was something, that there might be—in short, that Mr. Beresford and you—forgive me! I don't mean to say that it would not be most suitable. Everybody knows how fond he is of you—and not much wonder.'

'Indeed, indeed you must not talk to me so,' cried Mrs. Meredith, distressed; 'my affairs are not public business, Mr. Maxwell.'

'I came to tell you,' he said, doggedly, 'something you ought to know. I have no dislike to James Beresford. On the contrary, we are old friends; we were boys together. I did my best to shelter him from any reproach at the time. Everything I could do I did, and I think I succeeded. Perhaps now when one comes to reflect, it would have been better if I had not succeeded so well. But I could not stand by and see him ruined, see his peace of mind destroyed.'

'Are you talking of Mr. Beresford? Have you lost your senses, doctor? what do you mean?'

'You remember all that happened when Mrs. Beresford died?'

'I remember—oh yes—poor Annie! how she suffered, poor soul, and how truly he mourned for her—how heart-broken he was.'

'He had occasion,' said the doctor, grimly.

'Had occasion! I cannot imagine what you mean—there was never a better husband,' said Mrs. Meredith, with some fervour; 'never one who loved a woman better, or was more tender with her.'

'Too tender. I am not saying that I condemn him absolutely. There are cases in which in one's heart one might approve. Perhaps his was one of these cases; but anyhow, Mrs. Meredith, you ought to know.'

She got impatient, for she, too, had the feeling that to see her friend's faults herself was one thing, but to have him found fault with quite another. 'I should have thought that I knew Mr. Beresford quite as well as you did, doctor,' she said, trying to give a lighter tone to the conversation. 'I have certainly seen a great deal more of him for all these years.'

'You could not know this,' said Mr. Maxwell, 'nor would

I have told you but for the extremity of the case. Listen! She might have lingered I cannot tell how long—weeks, months—it was even possible years.’

‘Yes!’ the assent was no assent, but an exclamation of excitement and wonder.

‘I believe he meant it for the best. She was mad about having something given to her to put her out of her misery, as soon as we knew that she was past hope. Mrs. Meredith, I feel bound to tell you—when you know you can judge for yourself. He must have given her something that day after the consultation. It is no use mincing words—he must have given her—her death.’

‘Doctor! do you know what you are saying?’ She rose up from her chair—then sank back in it looking as if she were about to faint.

‘I know too well what I am saying. I huddled it up that there might be no inquiry. I don’t doubt she insisted upon it, and I don’t blame him. No, I should not have had the courage to do it, but I don’t blame him—altogether. It is a very difficult question. But you ought not to marry him—to be allowed to marry him in ignorance.’

She made no answer. The shock came upon her with all the more force that her mind was already weakened by anxiety. Given her her death! what did that mean? Did it mean that he had killed poor Annie, this man who was her dearest friend? A shiver shook all her frame. ‘I think you must be wrong. I hope you are wrong,’ she said. It was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering. The sudden horror chilled and froze her. ‘Oh, Mr. Maxwell, he never could have done it! No, no, I will never believe it,’ she said.

‘But I know it,’ said the doctor; ‘there could be no doubt of it; I could not have been deceived, and it was no crime in my eyes. He did it in love and kindness—he did it to serve her. But still no woman should marry him, without knowing at least—’

‘There was never any question of that,’ she said, hurriedly, in the commotion of her mind. Then it seemed cowardly of her to forsake him. She paused. ‘He is worthy of any woman’s confidence. I will not hear a word against him. He did not do it. I am sure he did not do it! or, if he did, he was not to blame.’

The words had not left her lips when the door was opened, and the subject of this strange conversation, Mr. Beresford himself, came into the room. They were both too agitated for concealment. She looked at the doctor with sudden terror. She was afraid of a quarrel, as women so often are. But Maxwell himself was too much moved to make any pretences. He rose up suddenly, with an involuntary start; but he was shaken out of ordinary caution by the excitement of what he had done. He went up to the new comer, who regarded him with quiet surprise, without any salutation or form of politeness. 'Beresford,' he said, 'I will not deceive you. I have been telling her what it is right she should know. I don't judge you; I don't condemn you; but whatever happens, she has a right to know.'

It is one of the penalties or privileges of excitement that it ignores ignorance so to speak, and expects all the world to understand its position at a glance. James Beresford gazed with calm though quiet astonishment upon the man who advanced to meet him with tragedy in his tone. 'What is the matter?' he said, with the simplicity of surprise. Then seeing how pale Mrs. Meredith was, he went on with some anxiety, 'Not anything wrong with Oswald? I trust not that?'

Mrs. Meredith stirred in her chair and held out her hand to him. She could not rise. She looked at him with an agitated smile. 'I put perfect faith in you, perfect faith!' she said, 'notwithstanding what anyone may say.'

'In me!' he said, looking from one to another. He could not imagine what they meant.

'Beresford,' said Maxwell again, 'I will not hide it from you. It has been in my mind all this time. I have never been able to look upon you as I did before; at a crisis like this I could hold my tongue no longer. I have been telling all that happened at the death of your first poor wife.'

'My *first*—!' the exclamation was under his breath, and Maxwell thought he was overcome with horror by the recollection; but that was not what he was thinking of: his first wife!—there was something sickening in the words. Was this his Annie that was meant? It seemed profanation, sacrilege. He heard nothing but that word. Maxwell did not understand him, but there was another who did. The doctor went on,

‘I have never said a word about it till this day, and never would but for what was coming. You know that I took the responsibility, and kept you free from question at the time.’

‘What does he mean?’ This question, after a wondering gaze at the other, Beresford addressed to Mrs. Meredith behind him. ‘All this is a puzzle to me, and not a pleasant one; what does he mean?’

‘This is too much,’ said the doctor. ‘Be a man, and stand to it now at least. I have not blamed you, though I would not have done it myself. I have told her that you consented—to what I have no doubt was poor Mrs. Beresford’s prayer—and gave her—her death——’

‘I—gave her her death—you are mad, Maxwell! I, who would have died a dozen times over to save her!’

‘There is no inconsistency in that. You could not save her, and you gave her—what? I never inquired. Anyhow it killed her, poor girl! It was what she wanted. Am I blaming you? But, James Beresford, whatever may have been in the past, it is your duty to be open now, and she ought to know.’

‘My God, will you not listen to me?’ cried Beresford, driven to despair. He had tried to stop him, to interrupt him, but in vain. Maxwell had only spoken out louder and stronger. He had determined to do it. He was absolutely without doubts on the matter, and he was resolute not to be silenced. ‘She ought to know,’ he went on saying under his breath to himself.

‘But it is not true. It is an invention, it is a mistake! I do anything against her dear life!—even in suffering, even in misery, was she not everything to me?’

‘That is all very well to say. You did it in love, not in hatred, I acknowledge that. Beresford, no one here will betray you. Why not be bold and own to what you did? I could not be deceived; it was from your hand and no other your wife got her death. How could I, her doctor, be deceived?’

‘Dr. Maxwell,’ said a low voice from the door; and they all started with a violent shock, as if it had been Annie Beresford herself come back from the grave. Mrs. Meredith rose hastily and went towards this strange apparition. ‘It was Cara, with cheeks perfectly colourless, with blue eyes dilated, standing as she had entered, transfixed by those terrible words. But the girl took no notice of her friend’s rush towards her.’

She put out her hand to put Mrs. Meredith away, and kept her eyes fixed on the doctor, as if there was no one else in the room.

'Dr. Maxwell,' said Cara, her young bosom heaving, 'I have come just in time. You are making a great, great mistake, for that is not true.'

'Cara, child, go away, go away; I never meant this for you.'

'No one knows but me,' she said; 'I was in the room all the time. I have never forgotten one thing, nor a word she said. She wanted him to do it, but he would not. He rushed away. I did not understand then what it meant.'

The girl stood trembling, without any support, so slight, so young, so fragile, with her pale face. Her father had scarcely thought of Cara before since she was the plaything of his younger life. All at once his eyes seemed to be opened, and his heart. He went to her by an irresistible impulse, and put his arm round her. Love seemed to come to life in him with very terror of what he was about to hear.

'It was not you!' he said, with a low cry of anguish; 'it was not you!'

'She would not let me,' said Cara. 'I asked to do it, but she would not let me. She looked up—to God,' cried the girl, the tears rushing to her eyes, 'and took it. Did not He know everything? You would not be angry, papa? you would not have cast me away if I had taken something to get free of pain? Would He? He was her father too.'

'O, Cara, no one blames her—no one blames her!' said Mrs. Meredith, with unrestrained tears.

'She looked up to God,' said the girl, with her voice full of awe. 'She said I was to tell you; but I did not understand what it meant then, and afterwards I could not speak. It has always seemed to stand between us, papa, that I had this to tell you and could not speak.'

'My child,' said the father, his lips trembling, 'it has been my fault; but nothing shall stand between us any more.'

The two others looked on for a moment with conflicting feelings. Mrs. Meredith looked at them with generous tears and satisfaction, yet with a faint pang. *That* was over now. She had always intended it should end thus; but yet for the moment, such is the strange constitution of the heart, it gave her a passing pang. As for the doctor, he gathered his gloves and his hat together with great confusion. He had made a

fool of himself. Whatever the others might do, how could he contemplate this solemn disclosure he had come to make, which had been turned into the officious interference of a busybody? He took no leave of anyone; but when they were all engaged with each other, made a bolt for the door of the back drawing-room, and got out, very red, very uncomfortable, and full of self-disgust. He was touched too by the scene which had been so unexpectedly brought before him, and felt tears, very unusual to him, tingling in the corners of his eyes. He met Edward on the stairs; but Edward was too much preoccupied to observe how Maxwell was looking.

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘if Miss Beresford is in the drawing-room? There is a gentleman waiting for her downstairs.’

‘If you mean Cara,’ said the doctor, ‘she is there, and the mistress of the situation, I can tell you. Oh, never mind; I can let myself out. You’ll find them all there.’

Edward stared a little, but went on to deliver his message. ‘I hope I am not disturbing anyone,’ he said, in the formal manner which he had put on; ‘but there is someone, very impatient, waiting for Miss Beresford—I mean Cara,’ he added, half ashamed of himself, ‘downstairs.’

Cara roused herself from her father’s arm. It revived her more than anything else to see that Edward was turning away again to leave the room. She shook the tears from her eyes, and roused herself into sudden energy. ‘That was why I came,’ she said. ‘O, Mrs. Meredith, where is Oswald? We must find him, or they will all break their hearts.’

‘Who—you, Cara, my darling? no one shall break your heart.’

‘No, no,’ she cried, with a little start of impatience. ‘It is time this was over. He never would tell you the truth. Oh, we must find him, wherever he is, for Agnes has gone too.’

They all gathered about with looks of wonder, Edward making but one step from the door where he stood. His countenance gleamed over with a sudden light; he put out his hands to her unawares.

‘Agnes—who is Agnes!’ said Mrs. Meredith. ‘O, Cara, what does it all mean? I know nothing about him—where he is. He was to come back to-day.’

‘Agnes is Agnes Burchell,’ said Cara. ‘He has been

telling me of her all this time. He has been spending his whole time going after her. And she is gone too, and it is her father who is downstairs. Oh, think how we can find them! Her father is very anxious. Oswald should not have done it,' said Cara, with the solemnity of her age. 'I always begged him, and he always promised, to ask you to go.'

'This is extraordinary news,' said Mrs. Meredith, dropping into the nearest chair. She was trembling with this renewed agitation. 'And you knew it, Cara; you have been his confidante? Oh, what a strange mistake we have all made!'

'It was not my fault,' said Cara, softly. She gave a furtive glance at Edward as she spoke, and his mother looked at him too. Edward's countenance was transformed, his eyes were lit up, smiles trembling like an illumination over his face. Mrs. Meredith's heart gave a leap in her motherly bosom. She might have been wounded that it was none of her doing; but she was too generous for so poor a thought. He will not go to India now, she said to herself in her heart. The pang which Cara had given her unwittingly was nothing to the compensation thus received from her equally unconscious hands.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE WORST SCRAPE OF ALL.

A RUMOUR had spread in the little hamlet which had gathered about the junction, of some travellers who had missed their train. The faintest rumour echoes a long way in the quiet of the country, and as the village was chiefly formed of the cottages of railway labourers and porters, it was natural that this kind of report should travel more swiftly than anything else. Oswald and his companion walked down the still road in the soft dusk like two ghosts. In the mind of Agnes nothing less than despair was supreme. What was to become of her? Shame, disgrace, destruction, the loss of all things. How could she dare to face the wondering women in the House? Sister Mary Jane might understand her, but who else? And what comments there would be, and what talk!

And home—how could she go home? To spend a night at an inn at all was something entirely strange to Agnes. But thus—all alone, and with a gentleman; one who was not related to her, of whom she could give no account or befitting explanation! A wild fancy seized her of flying from him, disappearing into some corner behind a high hedge, some nook under the trees. But this was as futile as everything else, and might be worse than anything else. She had the bondage of custom before her, though she had put herself into a position in which all her familiar habits were thrown to the winds. And yet going to the inn with Oswald was about as bad as spending a night in direful desolation in the dark corner of a field. The one was not much better than the other! If she could have got away at once, it was the field she would have chosen. She could have crept into a corner in the dark, and there waited, though she might have been frightened, till the morning broke and there was an early train. Had she but done that at once, stolen away before he could see what she was doing! But she could not disappear from his side now, at the risk of being pursued and argued with and entreated and brought back. So, with her mind in a blank of despair, not knowing what to think, she walked close by his side between the hedgerows through the soft darkness. Oh, what a punishment was this for the indiscretion of the day! It was indiscretion, perhaps, but surely the punishment was more terrible than the guilt. She drew the thick gauze veil which was attached to her bonnet over her face. What could anyone think of her—in that dress? Then there came into her mind, to increase her pain, an instant vivid realisation of what her mother would say. Mrs. Burchell would judge the very worst of any such victim of accident. ‘Why did she lose her train?’ her mother would have said. ‘Depend upon it, such things don’t happen when people take common care.’ Agnes knew how her mother would look, denouncing the unfortunate with hard eyes in which was no pity; and naturally her mother was her standard. So, no doubt, people would think—people who were respectable, who never placed themselves in embarrassing situations. They would go further, she thought, with a still more poignant touch of anguish—they would say that this is what comes of religious vagaries, of sisterhoods, of attempts at being or doing something more than other people.

They would laugh and sneer, and hold her up as an example—and oh, never, never, never, could she get the better of this! it would cling to her all her life—never, never could she hold up her head again!

Oswald too was full of thought, planning in his mind how he was to carry out his intentions, his mind so overflowing with plans that he could not talk. He had been grieved to the heart by the dilemma into which his carelessness had plunged them. But now he began to recover, and a certain sensation of boyish pleasure in the escapade came stealing into his mind. He would not have acknowledged it, but still there it was. The village was a mere collection of common cottages in yellow brick, as ugly as it was possible to imagine; but the inn was an old roadside inn of past times, red, with a high-pitched roof all brown with lichen, showing the mean modernness of the others. An inquisitive landlady stood at the door watching for them, inquisitive but good-natured, the fame of their failure having travelled before them. Oswald strode on in advance when he saw the woman. 'Good evening,' he said, taking off his hat, which was a civility she was not used to. 'If you are the landlady, may I speak to you? There is a young lady here who has missed her train. She is very much frightened and distressed. Can you give her a room and take care of her. It is all an accident. Can you take care of her for the night?'

'And you too, sir?' asked the woman.

'Oh, never mind me. It is the young lady who is important. Yes, Miss Burchell,' he said, going back to Agnes, 'here is someone who will attend to you. I will not ask you to talk to me to-night,' he added, dropping his voice, 'but do not be surprised if you find me gone in the morning. I shall be off by the first train, and you will wait for me here. I think you will be comfortable—everything shall be settled directly.'

'Oh, how can I, how can I? Mr. Meredith, it is not possible. I must bear it. It was not our fault. I will tell them everything, and—I will go home.'

'Yes, darling, with your husband. What does it matter this month or next. You have promised me one way or the other. There is no harm in getting married,' he said, with a breathless eagerness in his voice. 'Is it not by far the best thing? And then all will be settled at once.'

‘No, not that!’ she said, breathless too with excitement. ‘But if you will go to the House and tell Sister Mary Jane everything—you must tell her everything—’

‘I will,’ he said fervently. ‘Surely you may trust me. And I will bring her to you in the afternoon. Everything shall be right. Now go, my dearest, and rest, and don’t worry yourself. I will take all the blame upon myself.’

‘The blame was mine too,’ she said, gravely. She strained her eyes through the darkness to see his face. Was he taking it with levity—was he unaware of the terrible, terrible seriousness of the whole business? She could not bear the idea that it was anything less than tragic to him too.

‘No, I cannot allow that. It was my folly, my thoughtlessness. But could I be expected to think to-day? I can’t even say good-night to you, darling. Promise me to sleep, and not to worry yourself with thinking. By six o’clock I shall be off to set all right.’

‘To bring the Sister?’ she said, casting a soft look back at him. ‘I shall be very, very grateful. Good-night.’

‘Good-night,’ he said. He stood in the little hall and watched her going upstairs, her slight little figure drooping in its black drapery, the cheerful landlady preceding her with a light. What a revolution since the morning! Then she had been a kind of divinity worshipped at a distance, now she was his; and not only his, but already dependent upon him, absolutely in his hands. To do Oswald justice, this consciousness only increased the touch of reverence which had always mingled with his love. She was not a girl like other girls, though, indeed, full of levity and carelessness as he was, Oswald had never been disrespectful even of those ‘other girls,’ who were not to be mentioned in the same breath with Agnes. She was by herself; there was no one like her. Even in this indiscretion which she had committed—and though it was entirely his fault yet it could not be denied that it was an indiscretion—what a delicate veil of maidenly reserve had been about her! Still like one of Perugino’s angels just touching earth, ready to fly if exposed to a look or word less exquisite than her own purity. This was how he thought of her, and it is well for all parties when young lovers think so; though not the wildest extravagance of ‘fastness’ could be worse than what Agnes thought of it in the silence of the little room upstairs where she had already

fallen down upon her knees by the bed, crying her heart out, her face hidden in an anguish of shame. Oswald's feelings were less acute. He went out when she disappeared and sat down on the bench outside, where two or three silent men were sitting smoking, drinking their beer, and giving forth a fragmentary remark at intervals. There was no light but that which streamed from the open door, and the little red-curtained window beside it, where the same kind of dull sociable drinking was going on. Outside, the soft night air and pale yet warm night sky elevated the homely scene. Oswald took off his hat and exposed his head to the fresh caressing of the air, which blew his hair about and refreshed him body and soul. He was tired, for he had taken an unusual amount of exercise, not to speak of the strain of mind he was still undergoing. He took a mighty draught of beer, and felt himself strong again. Naturally there had been no such beverage in the boat; and even the smile of Agnes, which, though sweet was very timid, did not sustain his strained muscles; and he had rowed hard for the last half-hour at least, and was unaccustomed to the exertion—out of training, as he would have said. So that altogether it was in a very agreeable moment of repose that he set himself to a final arrangement of his plan. He was in a scrape, no doubt; but that he was used to, and this time what a glorious scrape it was! a fit climax to all the others of which he had exhausted the sensations; but for Agnes indeed, and her pain, it was, he said to himself, the very way he would have chosen to settle his marriage. No lingering negotiations, no presentations to her family, and sense of being on his best behaviour while they inspected him, no fuss of presents and trousseau, and tiresome delay (to tell the truth, no one would have enjoyed the presents and the preparations, and all the importance of the intervening time more than Oswald; but his easy mind easily ignored this, and took refuge in the most desirable aspect of the alternative). The only thing he disliked in the prospect before him was the idea of having to get up very early in the morning, which, especially after the fatigue and excitement of this day, was a bore to think of. Otherwise everything was ideal, he persuaded himself. He watched a light come into a window overhead as he sat resting enjoying the fresh air. That must be her room, bless her! Poor darling, how pale she had grown, how frightened! But

never in her sweet life to come should there be anything to be frightened of. Thus Oswald resolved in his tender thoughts.

‘Do you know at what hour the first train goes?’ he asked of one of the men who were sitting by.

‘Well, master, mostly it’s at six o’clock,’ was the answer; ‘but to-morrow, you see, being Sunday——’

‘Good heavens! Sunday!’ he said, with a cry of dismay.

‘Well, wherever ’ave you been a-living not to know it was Sunday. Any fool knows that. I reckon, master, as you’ve come from abroad. They don’t take no notice of Sundays there, I’ve heard say. It’s Sunday, and ten o’clock is the first train; and early enough too,’ said the man, who was a porter on the railway, and felt the hardship of the rest disturbed.

Oswald could not find a word to say. He had forgotten this terrible fact. It made everything doubly terrible for the moment, and it turned all his own plans into foolishness. He sat dumb, unable to say a word, unable even to think, his mouth open, his heart beating. What was to be done? Now, indeed, he felt the harm of his folly; a whole day lost, and Agnes kept in this equivocal position, and all tongues let loose. This fairly sobered the light-hearted young man. He stole upstairs to the little bedroom which had been prepared for him, still speechless, as much cast down as Agnes was. What were they to do? He flung himself on his bed in a kind of despair.

Next morning, though it was not his custom, Oswald was awake as early as if the train had been six o’clock, as he thought. It was better not to let her know, not to agitate her further. Having once got this idea into his head, he went further, and resolved upon the most disinterested course of action possible. He would go all the same, though he could do nothing he wished to do—and carry out her will; she should be satisfied. To do this, with newborn delicacy, he left the inn early, so that she might suppose he had only carried out his original intention. What would Sister Mary Jane say to him? He would be the wolf and Agnes the lamb in her eyes. How could anyone think otherwise? But what did it matter so long as Agnes had justice? He went up to town in the aggravating tedium of a slow Sunday train.

It was true he had come down in a slow train the day before, but that was entirely different, there was no tedium in it. The streets were very still when he got to town, everybody being at church, as good Christians ought, and it was only after repeated knockings that he got admission at the big door of the House. The portress gave a little scream at sight of him. 'Oh, sir, can you tell us anything of Miss Burchell? She never wrote to say she was going to stay, and we've been that anxious about her!'

'Can I speak to the Sister Superior?' said Oswald, somewhat troubled in his mind as to the reception he would receive.

'The Sister Superior has been sent for to the mother-house, sir,' said the portress. 'She had to go yesterday. It is some meeting—nobody knew it till yesterday. Perhaps she will be back to-morrow, but we don't know. Would Sister Catherine do? If it was anything about Miss Burchell——'

'It was the Sister Superior I wanted,' said Oswald, and after a pause he turned away. He would not say anything about Miss Burchell. After he had left the House, it occurred to him that even this humble portress would have been better than nothing, but then it was too late. He walked about the streets for a whole hour, questioning with himself what he ought to do. His mother? She was very kind, but she was not without her prejudices; and would not she recollect afterwards that her first sight of her daughter-in-law had been at the railway inn at the junction, in a semi-conventual dress, and a most equivocal position. If he could but have laid hands on Cara? But on what excuse could he run away with a second young lady? No—there was nothing for it now; he must go back to Agnes, and tell her of his non-success, which was not his fault, and next day he must carry out his own plan. There was nothing else for it. He went to the chambers of a friend, not venturing to go home, and borrowed some clothes; then went back again in the afternoon. There were few trains, and not many people were travelling so far. He was the only individual who got out at the junction, where already he was a person of importance.

'The young lady said as there was another lady coming,' the porter said to him, who had told him last night about the

train ; and the man looked suspiciously about the carriage, in the netting and under the seat.

‘Do you think I’ve made away with her?’ said Oswald ; but he trembled as he walked down the road to the inn between the two high hedgerows. Agnes was walking about, waiting, with wistful eyes. He saw at a glance that she had modified her dress by some strange art not to be divined by man. Her cloak was laid aside ; her long black dress looked severely graceful in comparison with the snippings and trimmings of fashion, but not otherwise extraordinary. And she had a simple hat, borrowed from the landlady’s daughter, over the warm golden brown Perugino hair. She stood still, clasping her hands, when she saw he was alone.

‘It is no fault of mine,’ he said, going up to her in hurried apology and desperation. Agnes grew so pale that he lost all his courage.

‘She would not come then?’ the poor girl cried, with a half-sobbing sigh.

‘No, no ; not that ; she was not there. It is our bad luck. She has gone to the mother-house, whatever that may be. What could I do ? I have done nothing but think since I left you. O Agnes, forgive me, my darling, for having brought you into this ! My own plan is the only one ; but I never thought of this—Sunday—to-morrow, to-morrow every thing can be arranged.’

This was the text upon which he enlarged for the whole afternoon. There was not another train till the evening, and what could they do even if there had been trains ? They had to eat the chicken which the curious landlady had prepared, together, and went out again in the afternoon, and sat under a tree and talked. They were miserable, or at least Agnes was miserable—and yet happy. Oh, if she had but known, if she had but gone on this morning, or back to Limpet Bay, where there were Sisters and a shelter ! But now ! every moment compromised her more, and made it more impossible to do anything but acquiesce in what he proposed. And so the long, slow, weary, anxious, miserable, delicious Sunday wore to a close ; it was all these things together. They took the landlady into their confidence, and told her all that had happened, while Agnes sat crying. She thought even this woman would shrink from her ; but the woman, on the contrary, was deeply interested, delighted, and flattered.

There was the parsonage half a mile off, and the clergyman the kindest old gentleman. A wedding in the house! She could not contain herself with pride and pleasure. Crying! what was the young lady crying about? An 'usband that adored her instead of them nunnery places as she never could abide to hear of. This unexpected support quite exhilarated Oswald, and it cowed Agnes, who had no power of self-assertion left.

In this way it all came about according to Oswald's rapid programme which he had sketched out as soon as he knew they were too late on Saturday night. He was so much in earnest, so eager to carry out his plans, that, much as it went against his mind to do so, he went to town again on Monday by the six o'clock train. As soon as the offices were open he presented himself at the proper place (wherever that may be; I have not the information) and got the licence. By this time he was so much himself again, his light heart had so regained its characteristic boyish ease, and the tragicality had gone so completely out of the situation, that it seemed to him the best of jokes—a delightful, practical pleasantry, a piece of charming mischief to startle all sober people. He went about in his hansom with involuntary smiles on his lips, the chief thing that alarmed him being the chance of meeting Edward or Cara or someone who would know him. How startled they would be when they knew! Poor dear little Cara, would she *feel* it just a little? But for the rest it was the greatest joke. To come down upon them with his wife—his *wife*! Oswald laughed in spite of himself, half with happiness, half with a sense of the fun. When he had got his licence safe in his pocket—which gave a kind of legality to the whole—he went to a famous milliner's, and had a large boxful of things packed up. This was a business which delighted him. He chose a little white bonnet, a white dress, partially made, which the lady's maid could arrange in an hour, the smiling milliner assured him, a veil which would envelop the figure of Agnes from top to toe, a hat in which she could travel. How she was to be transported to London in that white silk dress it did not occur to him to ask; for he was still young and thoughtless, though on the eve of being married. He had never seen her surrounded by any of the pretty finery which girls love, in nothing but her black dress and poke bonnet. To throw the veil about her, to see her

Perugino countenance under the large leaved hat with its drooping feathers, what a transformation it would be! And when, having done all his business, he travelled back to the junction with his big dressmaker's box, all thoughts except those of delighted anticipation had gone out of Oswald's mind. The junction had a friendly look to him, and he walked down the lane to the inn with the feeling of going home.

What a fortunate thing that the poor old governor had died when he did! Poor old fellow! his son did not grudge him his existence as long as he remained in this world, or rather in the other world across the seas in India, where he interfered with nobody. But as he did mean to die, what a thing it was that he should have done it just then. Oswald made a hurried run to his banker's while he was in town, and supplied himself with money, that grand requisite of all extravagant and eccentric proceedings. He was as happy as a child walking down the lane, the porters grinning and knowing all about it, carrying the big box after him; he had got his own portmanteau, too, with his best clothes in it, according to the orders which he had telegraphed to the Square; and all was ready for the wedding. Surely a stranger wedding never was. The little cluster of houses at the junction was as much excited as if the event had been a family one concerning each house. How did they know? Who could say? The landlady swore it was no doings of hers. Agnes would not wear the white silk which he had bought for her, but consented to put on a plain white muslin which the dressmaker next door had luckily just made for herself, and which she was free to dispose of at a profit. And so the soft June twilight dropped and the dew fell once more, and quite a little crowd hung about the inn, trying for a peep at 'them.' Only three days since they came from London in separate carriages to meet 'by accident' on the sands. And now they were bridegroom and bride, and to-morrow was their wedding-day.

CHAPTER XLIV.

CLEARING UP.

MR. BURCHELL was brought upstairs with some solemnity. Though Mrs. Meredith's mind was very full of all that had been passing, and with no small amount of personal feeling, a

father in such a case could not be put off. They were all agitated in different ways, the elder people painfully, the young ones happily. As for Edward, his energy and satisfaction knew no bounds. He even jarred upon the feelings of the others, though most innocently, his heart was so light. 'You are like Oswald,' his mother said to him, with a sigh of anxiety; 'you are not like yourself.' 'I feel like Oswald,' said Edward. He did not seem able to put his self-gratulation into fitter words. The sense of being second, of being the shadow to Oswald's sunshine, went out of his mind; and, with it, all sense of grudging and everything like envy, which, however deeply repressed and disapproved, had been in his heart hitherto, an involuntary weakness. All that was over now. That Cara loved him he scarcely ventured to believe; but she was free; she was not swept up like every other good thing by his elder brother. What an ease diffused itself through his heart! And with Cara, too, the sensation was that of ease; her bonds were broken. She might have stood faithful still as the Screen (for indeed that poor lady was in the *Vita Nuova*, and it was not kind of great Dante, great as he was!) but circumstances had broken her bonds. Cara had not been intimate with Agnes Burchell that she should be much disturbed by finding out her identity with Oswald's Agnes. And after the first shock she was confident that nothing amiss could have happened to her while Oswald was there. And her own pre-occupations made the whole matter but secondary in her mind. Was it selfish of her? But she could not help it. She had cast off more than one burden; her young frame was tingling with the excitement of the two disclosures she had made, one of which had brought her father to her, the other—well, the other at least had set her free; it had set her right with others, if nothing more. It was Edward who went to the dining-room to conduct Mr. Burchell upstairs, feeling such a friendliness towards him as words could not express. Had not he been the occasion of it all? 'My mother begs that you will come upstairs,' he said, feeling an inclination to hug his visitor, though he was little captivating. Mr. Burchell had a feeling of disapproval of the house and all that were in it. It was the house Roger had given an account of, where he had dined on Sunday, and where the lady lived who was so intimate with Mr. Beresford. The Rector disapproved of all

such intimacy. But he was anxious and rather unhappy about his daughter, and it was his duty to take Agnes back out of this doubtful, perhaps polluted house. So he followed his conductor upstairs, looking about him with involuntary criticism. These kind of people had so many comforts that did not fall to the lot of their superiors in every moral sense. Large comfortable houses, many servants, the *Times* every day (he found it on the table in the dining-room), and many other luxuries. He could not help making this remark to himself; he could not afford such pleasures; and now his child, his daughter, not theirs who perhaps deserved it, had gone away. Matters were not mended when Mrs. Meredith, with all her usual sweetness, but with a thrill of agitation still about her, came up to him holding out her hand.

‘Cara tells me that you are anxious about your daughter, and that my son—knows her,’ she said falteringly. It was so difficult to know what to say.

‘So she tells me,’ said the Rector. ‘You will understand it is not from me; I know nothing of it. Agnes has said nothing; and perhaps,’ he added, looking round with a little natural defiance, ‘her absence may turn out to be quite simple; there may be nothing in it. She is not a good correspondent. But we are anxious, her mother and I.’

‘I do not know where Oswald is. Oh! heaven knows, if my son has anything to do with it, I shall be grieved, grieved and ashamed to the heart! But no harm will happen to her in Oswald’s company,’ said Mrs. Meredith, raising her head in her turn with tearful pride. ‘I know my boy.’

‘It is what I would not say of any child of mine, or of myself, for that matter,’ said the Rector. ‘Who can tell what a moment may bring forth? But if there should be anything in it, and you have any clue to your son’s movements——’

‘I have none. Thursday or Friday he said he would come back. Cara, if you can tell us anything——’

Cara told at once what she knew; how he had heard that Agnes was going somewhere, she did not remember where, and that he had made up his mind to go too, and explain himself. ‘Limpet Bay; she is not there,’ said Mr. Burchell. He took no interest in the rest of the story, which excited the others so much, that half of them spoke together. Edward, however, had the *pas* as being most energetic. ‘I will go at once to Limpet Bay,’ he said, ‘and find out if anything is

known of them; that seems the best thing.' Mr. Burchell looked at him with a half-suspicion in his eyes. But this was how it was finally arranged. The Rector himself seemed to have greater confidence in wandering about town. He was going now to his sister's at Notting Hill, and then to the House. Then he would come back again to the Square, to see if any news had come. 'My son Roger will be in London in an hour or two,' he added, with a kind of vague trust in that. But he neither sanctioned nor objected to Edward's mission. He had no notion himself what to do. He had no faith in his own child, and even thought worse of Mrs. Meredith—if there could be a worse or a better about such a person—for thinking well of hers. When he went away at last in his heavy distress they were all relieved. He was to come back in a few hours to see if any news had been received. As for Edward, he was like a man transformed. He ran upstairs with airy energy, thrust what he wanted into a bag, tossed a heap of notebooks on the floor (where his mother found them, and picking them up carefully, put them away behind his bureau where he could not find them), and came down again swiftly and lightly, ready for anything. Then it was arranged that Cara and her father should walk with him to the House to see if anything had been heard there. This new chapter of anxiety was a relief to all of them, strange as it may seem to say so. Even Mrs. Meredith was comforted, after all the personal excitement of the afternoon, to have this outlet to her emotion. She was not afraid that anything very dreadful could have happened to Oswald, nor, though Mr. Burchell thought her confidence wicked, to anyone else, through her boy. She knew Oswald's faults, she said to herself—who better? but Agnes would get no harm from him. On the other hand, the fact that they had disappeared together was in itself active harm. The boy was safe enough, but the girl—that was a more difficult matter; and even a young man who decoyed away, or could be said to have decoyed away, not a poor milliner or housemaid, but a girl in his own rank—society would look but darkly, there could be no doubt, on such a man. It was evident that in any point of view to find Oswald was the chief thing to be thought of. In the meantime, however, they had been reckoning without their train. There was not one going to Limpet Bay till six o'clock, and a pause perforce had to be made. And

people began to come in, to call in the midst of their agitation, the first being actually shown up into the drawing-room while they still stood together talking in their scarcely subsiding excitement. This was more than the others could bear. Mrs. Meredith indeed met her visitors with her usual smiles, with hands stretched out, with all the air of soft and kind interest in them which bound her friends so close to her; the air of agitation about her only increased the kindness of her looks; but the three others were not so courageous. They all forsook her, stealing away one by one. Mr. Beresford went to his library, where he had so many things to think of. Cara and Edward, stealing away one after the other, met on the stairs. 'Will you come into the Square,' he said, 'till it is time for my train?' The Square was a spot where they had played together when they were children. It had been avoided by both of them without any reason given: now they went out and took refuge in it, where the little ladies and gentlemen of the Square were still playing. They wandered demurely under the flowery shrubs and those kind trees which do not despise London, their hearts beating softly yet loud, their young lives in a tender harmony. They seemed to be walking back into the chapter of their childhood and to see themselves playing hide and seek among the bushes. 'You used to look just like that,' Edward said, pointing to a pretty child in a white sun-bonnet with her lap full of daisies, who looked up at them with serious blue eyes as they passed. Cara was not so very much older, and yet what a world of youthful experience lay between her and this child. Then naturally they began to talk of what had happened to their knowledge, and of what might have happened which they did not know.

'And you think he really loved her,' Edward said, his voice at this word taking a reverential tone. 'He must indeed—or else——. But was he in earnest—he was always so full of levity? And where can they have gone?'

'He did not mean to have gone for more than the day. It must have been some accident. He would not have done anything again to get her scolded. I scolded him for it before.'

'You scolded him. I wish you would scold me, Cara,' said Edward, looking at her. 'You never talk to me as you used to talk to him. What bad feelings you used to rouse in

my mind—you who are as good as an angel! hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness. I went very near to hating my brother. Poor Oswald, I shall stand by him now through thick and thin.'

'I am glad of that,' said Cara, thankfully ignoring what went before.

'That is your doing too, like the other; Cara—there seems so many things that I want to say to you.'

'Oh, we must not talk of anything to-day, but how to get this settled,' cried the girl, with a nervous shiver. 'What a trouble for your mother, to see all these people to-day. I could not stay to help her—it seemed impossible; but she—she could not be unkind to anyone,' said Cara, with generous fervour; though indeed Mrs. Meredith, unwittingly, had strewn a few thorns in Cara's pathway too.

'Yes,' said Edward; 'I don't think my mother is a humbug—at least, yes, she is, in the way of kindness. She can't bear that anyone should feel neglected—and yet she means it, too,' he added, doubtfully looking up at the window, at which some of her visitors showed, for the day was very warm. Her friends had flooded back upon her, notwithstanding her recent widowhood. It was not like going into society, they all said. Society, indeed, went to her instead. To desert her in her troubles was not a friend's part. The consequence of this doctrine was that her receptions were almost as crowded as ever, and that all who considered themselves her intimates were more punctual than ever they had been.

'Ought we not to go?' said Cara at last, and they turned and came out through the dusty bushes once more. The Square was not lovely in itself, but it looked like a garden of Eden to the two, when they had been walking in the cool of the day, like Adam and Eve, thinking of each other, talking, with little breaks and relapses into thoughts which were dangerous, but very sweet, of other things. Now they came out again, side by side. As they crossed the road, Roger Burchell joined them. He had been sent for, and had hurried up, poor fellow, to do his duty, and look for his lost sister. It was not a happy errand to begin with, nor was it exactly happiness for him to see Cara, though the thought of doing so had lent wings to his feet. He looked at her with a face full of suppressed agitation, longing and yet suspicious.

This was not the Meredith he was afraid of—this was the one with whom he was rather in sympathy, the unfortunate one, like himself. But there was something in the looks of the two which hurt Roger and angered him, he could scarcely have told why.

He addressed Edward rather roughly. 'If you are going after them, tell me,' he said, with a hoarse tone in his voice, 'or I will do it. There is no time to lose.'

'I am waiting only for the train,' said Edward. It was a valid excuse enough, and poor Roger felt that he might have waited hours for the train without being amused meantime in this heavenly fashion. The gate of the garden was at some little distance from the house, close to the thoroughfare which passed along the end of the Square. They could see along this line of road as they turned to go back.

'We must go for Mr. Beresford,' Edward was saying. 'He was to go with us first to the House.'

Here he stopped short, open-mouthed, and the others stopped too, by that curious instinct which makes one man share in the startled sensations of his companion, without knowing what they mean. They were both startled like Edward. A carriage had drawn up within a little distance, and two people were getting out of it. Cara's eye, following Edward's, reached this little group. She ran forward, with a low cry. The new-comers, seeing nobody, occupied with themselves, advanced steadily. They came up to the corner of the Square. Just within that comparative stillness, they too started and stopped, he facing the others boldly, with smiles on his face, she drooping, blushing, trembling, with her hand on his arm.

'Oswald! for heaven's sake, who is this lady?' cried Edward, stepping in advance. The others waited with equal eagerness, though they knew very well who she was.

'Edward, my good fellow, you must make much of her,' said Oswald. He was really moved, and his gay voice faltered. 'You and Cara—We want you and Cara to make up our happiness. This is my wife.'

Though it was the public road, or, at least, the corner of the Square, Cara rushed forward and threw herself upon Agnes, who, red as a rose, with downcast face and eyes that could not bear the light, stood on her trial, as it were. Edward put out one hand to her and another to his brother,

without saying a word. He came, unthinking, between Roger and his sister.

'You and Cara.' He and Cara; nothing to say to the brother, who stood behind, red and lowering, looking on, noticed by no one, like a stranger. The two pairs fell together as by nature; Roger was the one who was left out. Is it not the very essence of all youthful story, even of all childish games, that someone should be left out? The little girl in the sun-bonnet in the Square garden could have produced half a dozen instances—that there is no fun without this; from puss in the corner upwards, the situation is invariable. But the left-out one does not see the fun. Roger stood, and changed into all manner of colours. He was not wanted. He and Agnes—he and Cara; for himself nobody, no companion, no notice, no share in it all. To take it sentimentally and sadly, and turn away, in all the dignity of the neglected, is one way; to be angry and resent is another. Roger, who felt the hot blood tingling down to his very finger-points, chose the latter. He made a step forward, pushing Edward aside, even thrusting aside Cara, and seized his sister roughly by the arm.

'What is the meaning of all this?' he said. 'Agnes, what do you want here? Where have you been? My father has come up to town in trouble about you; my mother is ill of it at home. Where have you been? These people have nothing to do with you. You've got to give me an explanation of it—and you too, sir!' cried Roger, with natural inconsistency, turning fiercely upon Oswald. What! this fellow, who had appropriated Cara so calmly, was he to have Agnes too?

'Oh, Roger! don't quarrel—don't quarrel! I went home this morning. Mamma knows,' cried Agnes, flushed and tearful, clasping her hands.

'And I am ready to give you every explanation,' said Oswald. 'You have a right to it. We were married on Tuesday. It was no doing of hers. The fault is all mine. And your mother is satisfied. Come in with us, and you shall have every detail. And come, Roger, shake hands with me. There is no harm done after all.'

'Harm done!' cried the young man in his bitterness; 'harm done! Is it no harm that she has disgraced herself? I don't know what greater harm is in the world.'

‘Oh, Roger, Roger!’

‘This has gone far enough,’ said Oswald; ‘take care what you say. Agnes, my darling, take my arm, and come to my mother. He does not know what he is saying; and Ned, come along, you and Cara. There are a hundred things to tell you. I want you to hear everything to-day.’

They passed him, while he stood fuming with bitter rage, not on account of Agnes, though she was the excuse for it. She took all the guilt to herself, however, looking at him pitifully, appealing to him as her husband led her to his mother’s door.

‘Roger, oh Roger, dear, come with us!’ she cried. She had spoken to no one but him.

But Roger paid no attention to Agnes. It was the other pair who had all his thoughts; he seemed to be supplanted over again, to have all the pangs of failure to bear over again. The idea of Oswald’s success with Cara had become familiar to him, and there was a little consolation in the fact that Edward, like himself, was unhappy. But at this new change, the poor young fellow ground his teeth. It was more than he could bear. Rage and anguish were in his eyes. Even Cara’s kind look at him, her little mute apology and deprecation of his wrath, increased it. Why should he go with them? What did it matter to him? His sister? Oh, there were plenty of people to look after his sister, and why should he follow them, who cared so little for him? But, after a while, he did follow them. There is something in this kind of suffering which attracts the sufferer to the rack. He is in course of healing when he has the courage to turn his back upon it, and go firmly away.

The whole young party went into the dining-room, where the *Times* which Mr. Burchell had grudged to Mrs. Meredith was still on the table. A dining-room is an oppressive place for such a purpose. It looks like bad interviews with fathers when there are admonitions to be given, or those fearful moments when a young offender is detained after the others have left the cheerful table, to be told of his faults. Agnes went into the house of her husband’s mother, with her heart in her mouth, or, at least, in her throat, leaping wildly, ready to sink into the ground with shame and terror. How would Mrs. Meredith receive her? Her own mother had yielded only to the arguments which the poor girl despised the most,

to the details of Oswald's income, and the settlements, about which he had already written to his lawyer. This mollified her—not Agnes's weeping explanations; and the bride's heart was still sore from the pang of this forgiveness, which Oswald, not caring in the least for Mrs. Burchell, had been quite satisfied with. He did not care very much for anything except herself, she had already found out, and took all disapproval with the frankest levity of indifference, which made it burn all the more into the heart of Agnes. Perhaps it was necessary for her to have a burden of one kind or another. And his mother; how would his mother look upon her? Would she set her down, as it was so natural for mothers to do, as the guilty party, the chief offender? Agnes had felt that her own mother had done this. She had excused Oswald. 'No man would ever think of such a thing, if he had not got encouragement.' Even Sister Mary Jane had said so, in a modified and more generous way. Was it always the poor girl's, the poor wife's fault? Agnes shrank into a corner. She could not take any courage from Cara's caressings, who came and hung about her, full of admiration and interest.

'I was his confidante all the time,' said Cara; 'but how was I to know that his Agnes was you?'

Agnes did not get much comfort out of this; she was not quite sure even that she liked him to have had a girl confidante. Though she was 'happy,' in the ordinary sense of the word, as applied to brides, happy in the love of her new husband, and in her own love for him, yet the troubles of the moment had seized hold upon her at their worst. She trembled for the opening of the door. She was almost at the limit of her powers of endurance. Her 'happiness' had cost her dear. She had got it at the sacrifice of all her tender prejudices, all her little weaknesses of sentiment. She took Roger's angry speech for true, and endorsed it. However happily it might all turn out, though everything should be better than she thought, still she would have disgraced herself. Nobody could be so much shocked at the whole business as she herself was. To everyone who censured her she was ready to say amen. It may be supposed, therefore, that the feelings with which she awaited Oswald's mother were agitating enough. If Mrs. Meredith received her unkindly, or coldly—and how was it possible that a mother

could receive otherwise than coldly such an unexpected bride?—it seemed to Agnes, in her discouragement and terror, that she must fall at her feet and die.

‘Go and tell my mother, Ned,’ said Oswald, who was himself rather breathless with suspense. ‘Go, you and Cara—take Cara with you. She will be kinder if you go together.’

‘Was she ever unkind?’ said Cara, half indignant.

‘Come all the same,’ said Edward, taking her hand in the freedom of the moment. ‘If I offer to make a sacrifice to her if she will forgive them?’ he whispered, as they went upstairs together—‘it will not be true—Cara, may I do it, not being true?’

‘Does she want to be paid for her kindness?’ said Cara, whispering back; but she smiled, notwithstanding, not knowing what he meant, yet knowing quite well what he meant. They went into the drawing-room thus, still for the moment hand in hand, which Mrs. Meredith perceiving, turned round from her guests with a little excitement. What had they come to tell her? She disengaged herself from the people whom she was talking to, and hurried towards them, breathless—‘Children, what is it?’ the conjunction had already had its effect.

‘Mother, Oswald and his wife are downstairs; come and speak to them—come and console her.’

‘His wife! Good heavens! has it gone so far?—and is that all?’ the mother said inconsistently in one breath.

Edward went up close to her, and whispered in her ear—‘And I no longer think of going to India. If that pleases you, forgive them.’

‘Traitor!’ said Mrs. Meredith; ‘that is not the reason;’ and then, ‘God bless you, my darling!’ she said, with tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONCLUSION.

It is not necessary to go into details, and tell how Mrs. Meredith forgave her son and received her new daughter. In any case, I don’t believe she would have been capable of

'hurting Agnes's feelings' by a cold reception; but as it was, she was as tender to her as if she been her own daughter, and Oswald was the stranger husband who had to be forgiven. A great deal of this was that superlative politeness which was part of her nature, and part of it was the result of Edward's communication. The cloud which had spoilt everything was definitely lifted from her life, and to be good to the trembling, timid bride, which was the first kind action within her reach, was Mrs. Meredith's way of thanksgiving for her happiness. It must be allowed it is not a bad way, as good as giving public thanks in church, or perhaps better, though that is good too. When Agnes began a faltering confession of wrong doing, Mrs. Meredith kissed her and stopped her.

'My dear, we will think nothing more of that,' she said; 'we might have wished it otherwise; but no one is beyond the reach of accident, and this will end most happily, please God, for all of us.'

The result of the interview was that Agnes fell in love with her mother-in-law—not a very usual thing, if one puts one's faith in books, yet not unparalleled. They understood each other, or rather the elder woman understood the younger, and with her warm natural charity was able to comprehend and excuse everything. She looked with a little wonder and amusement at the awe with which Agnes still regarded her bridegroom. That there should be someone in the world who did not simply make allowance for Oswald, and love him in spite of his faults, but to whom his faults were as yet invisible, and himself worthy of deepest respect and admiration, was a thing which was very amusing to his mother. She could scarcely keep from smiling when she saw the serious looks of veneration which his wife gave him. 'Hush, hush,' she said, when Edward, grown saucy, ventured to smile at his brother, and when she even herself felt tempted to say, 'How like Oswald!' Oswald was like everything that was fine and noble and generous to his bride.

'And if he did not think of himself quite so much, how good my poor boy is,' the mother said, with tears in her eyes; and in future, perhaps, he would not think so much of himself.

Anyhow, on the other side everybody was quite satisfied. Oswald, never ungenerous, made settlements upon his wife after they were married which filled the Burchell family with

admiration. And they got a pretty little house, and made a kind of religion of furnishing it; and for every pretty thing they got, Agnes, compunctious, hurried down to the House and devised something for the orphans. Sister Mary Jane grew used to these visits, and, being a wise woman, restrained undue liberalities. She gave a great deal of good advice to the young wife. 'If you take on another child for every bit of china,' she said, 'there will soon be no room for the girls, and no money left in the purse.'

'Oh, how can I let money be spent for nothings, when I know how much need there is in the world!' cried Agnes. It was difficult to answer such arguments. As for Oswald, he never attempted to answer them. He gave her to understand that she was a mixture of a goose and an angel.

'Both have wings, you know,' he said, going away light-hearted to his pleasures, and understanding about as much of the more serious feelings in her mind as her baby did when she had one, which fortunately was in good time. He made the best of husbands, ever eager that she should spend more money on her dressmaker, entertain more, have all manner of pleasures. Louisa Burchell, who was the next sister, thought the little house in Mayfair was like heaven; and Mrs. Burchell kept a list of the important people to whose houses Agnes was asked, looking up her noble acquaintances in the peerage, and finding out the incomes of the rich ones, and the works of those who wrote or painted (though these last figured much less largely in her mind). And Agnes was happy; to have a husband you love, and in due time a pretty baby; and a delightful little house in Mayfair, and a pair of ponies, and more dresses and bonnets than you wish for—could there be a happier lot? If a young woman in such beatific circumstances got confused sometimes in her mind, and wondered whether it might not be better to walk about at the head of a procession of school girls in a black cloak and poke-bonnet, and to work in stuffy schoolrooms, and to have no more recreation than could be got among the girls in St. Cecilia, what could that be but momentary aberration or even a kind of temporary insanity? Is not a wife better than a Sister? Oswald had no kind of doubt on the subject when he saw his beautiful young wife at the head of his table, and reflected with inward complacency upon the aspect she bore when first he saw her, though at that time he had thought the

poke-bonnet half-divine. But Agnes was not so sure, had not such unhesitating convictions as her husband, and wondered. This, perhaps, was the penalty she paid for her escapade. Oswald's light-heartedness was alien to her serious mood. He took his existence so easily! and she knew that life was not so easy a matter, and would take an occasional panic as the fair landscape glided past her, the beautiful days and years flying away from her as fields and trees do on a journey, when you seem yourself to be stationary, and it is the country about that flies and travels on either side.

If she had known him longer, if she had known him better, would it have made any difference? In all probability not the slightest, and she did not ask herself that question; for, after all, Oswald was Oswald, and the only man in the whole world——

As for the other personages mentioned in these pages, their affairs worked themselves out as was to be expected, with no very extraordinary results. Roger Burchell recovered of his wound because he could not help it, not with any will of his; and went out to India in due time, where he did very well and made steady progress, but neither then nor now became very remarkable. He married too in the due course of events, when he could afford it—as most men do, except perhaps in the very heart and centre of society, a sect so small that it does not affect the world's continuance, nor need necessarily affect our peace of mind who look on. He forgot Cara and the chapter in his life which was dominated by her, far more completely than the romantic reader would believe possible, and was not at all sure after he had been some years married whether it was not he who had behaved badly to her; and, indeed, I think his wife had this impression, and never having seen this object of his early affections, was rather pleased to believe Cara a little flirt with whom her Roger had been involuntarily 'entangled,' but escaped in time. So stories are travestied and turned into myths with piquant change of circumstance all over the world.

Mr. Maxwell had a more unlikely fate. Bursting out of No. 6 in the Square, in the trouble of his mind, after that unlucky interference which had come to less than nothing, but which must, he felt sure, cost him his friends, he went with murderous energy through all his round of patients, and took it out of them with unregulated zeal, making his

hypochondriacs really ill by way of variety, twisting the joints and cramping the sinews of the unhappy people in his hands as cruelly as Prospero. This way of avenging himself upon mankind, however, did not prevent him from suffering tortures in his own person. Should he apologise—should he appeal to Cara to intercede for him. Should he go humbly to the feet of the injured one, and ask to be kicked and forgiven? He adopted another expedient more wonderful than any of these? Next day was the day of his weekly visit to the Hill. Lovelier lights and visions than those that revealed themselves through the openings of the trees on that sweetest day of June could scarcely be. The sky was as soft as a child's eyes—the air as its breath. The trees hung rich and close still in their early green, throwing their wealth of foliage all the more closely together to hide that the flowers were over, the may faded, the golden laburnum boughs all dropped to dust. Through the leafy arches came glimpses of the great plain all billowy with trees, shadowing far into the blue distance, and the great grey castle with its royal flag. Underneath on the hedgerows there was one flush of the wild rose lighting up the winding road as with a smile. To live on such a day was enough for pleasure. To move through it easily without fatigue, with trees waving over you, and the unfathomable blue shining, and the sun throwing magical gleams over the landscape, hushed even the most restless soul to a semblance of goodness and happiness. Unless you happen to be toiling along a dusty road, in the blaze of the sunshine, in tight boots, or a dress too warm for the season, which circumstances I allow to be contrary both to happiness and goodness, I cannot understand how you could refuse to be good and happy on such a day.

But everything promoted these exemplary sensations about the Hill. Fatigue was not there, nor dust, nor undue heat. Old Miss Charity in her sun-bonnet, and less old but still not young Miss Cherry in her cool and soft grey gown, were on the lawn, surrounded by a world of roses—roses everywhere in standards, in dwarfs, on trellis-work, over arches, along the walls. The air was just touched by them to a delicate sweetness, to be elevated into beatitude when you approached your face to a particular flower. Mr. Maxwell arrived with his troubled soul, and the ladies made much of him. They compassionated him for his hot drive. They offered him tea;

they gave him, on his refusal of the tea, claret cup with great bits of ice tinkling in it, and making a grateful noise. They gave him a comfortable chair on the lawn, where he had his doctors' talk with old Miss Charity, and felt her pulse and admired its steady beat, not one more or less than it ought to be. 'Please God, if I live long enough, I'll pull you along to a hundred,' he said, with professional enthusiasm. 'But I shall not live long enough,' he added, in a despondent tone.

'How old are you now?' said Miss Charity. 'Fifty? phoo, nonsense. I am seventy-three. I want only seven-and-twenty of the hundred. You will be just over my present age when we've accomplished it. And what a thing to have lived for?' The old lady was more ready for the joke than he was—he shook his head.

'You can't think what foolish things I have been doing,' he said; 'never man made a greater fool of himself.'

'You have been asking someone to marry you, my poor man!'

'No, by Jove! I never thought of that,' he said, looking up quickly. Miss Cherry had walked discreetly out of hearing, as she always did while they had their medical talk. This was evidently a new idea to the doctor. 'No,' he went on, 'trying to keep other people from marrying, that was all.'

'Still sillier; they will hate you for ever and ever,' Miss Charity said, in her ignorance, seated cool and smiling in her garden chair.

Meanwhile Miss Cherry strayed to one of the openings and looked wistfully across the country. She wanted to hear about 'the child.' A thousand questions were on her lips, but in her soft old-maidenly self-consciousness she did not like to take the doctor aside in her turn, and there were questions which she did not wish to ask in her aunt's presence. It may be imagined then what her surprise was when, startled by a voice at her elbow, she turned round and found the doctor by her side. 'The views are lovely to-day,' he said; but he was not thinking of the views, Miss Cherry could see. Had he something painful to tell her—had anything gone wrong? She began to ask a few faltering questions. 'Tell me about Cara,' she said. 'I am so hungering for news of the child.' Miss Cherry looked up pathetically in the doctor's face with wistful anxiety in her soft eyes—everything about

her was soft, from her grey gown to her eyes. A mild consolatory woman, not charming like Mrs. Meredith, not clever like other people he knew, but a refreshment, like green lawns and green leaves and quietness to the heart. The doctor turned round to see that nobody was looking. The old lady, who had her suspicions of him, had gone in, and like a naughty old lady as she was, had gone upstairs to a bedroom window, where she stood behind the curtains, chuckling to herself, to watch the result. When Mr. Maxwell saw the coast was clear and nobody looking (as he thought), he turned round again to Miss Cherry, who stood anxiously waiting for the next word, and deliberately, without a word of preface, fired as it were point blank into her with a pistol at her heart—that is to say, he proposed. A greater shock never was administered by any human being to another. Right off on the spot, without wasting any words, he offered her himself and his brougham and his practice and all that he had. The old lady at the window—naughty old lady!—could make out the very moment when it was done, and saw Cherry's start and jump of amazement. 'Will she have him?' she asked herself. 'I could not put up with a man in my house.' But it does not do to take a gentle old maiden like Miss Cherry so suddenly. In the very extremity of her surprise, she said no. How she trembled! 'Oh no, I could not, I could not, thank you, Mr. Maxwell! I am too old *now*. Long ago I might have thought of such a thing; but I could not, I could not. It is not possible. You must excuse me *now*.'

'Oh, no one will force you, Miss Cherry, against your inclination,' said the doctor, angry and discomfited. And without waiting to say good-day to his patient, he went off and threw himself into his brougham more uncomfortable than before.

Whether Miss Cherry ever regretted this I cannot tell—perhaps if she had not been so entirely taken by surprise—but 'Oh no, oh no,' she said to herself, 'I could not have done it. It would have been cheating Cara.' But what a shock it was on that June afternoon! As if the man had brought an electric battery with him, Miss Charity said, who was the only one of the three, however, to whom it was an amusement and no shock at all.

Such was the end of this middle-aged wooing, which was all over in a quarter of an hour. The other of which we

know, which had been going on so long, and which only artificial motives made into a wooing at all, had been broken off very abruptly by that interpellation of Dr. Maxwell's and all that followed. It was not till after the commotion caused by Oswald's return, and all the arrangements consequent upon his marriage, were over, that the two friends returned to this broken chapter again. The changes which had happened had not thrown them apart, however, and the naturalness with which, even in the suspense of this question between themselves, their intercourse went on, showed plainly either that warmer relationships were unlikely or that they were the most natural things in the world; but which? Each of them had been slightly piqued by the absence of enthusiasm on the part of the other, but even that pique produced no enthusiasm in themselves. They were exactly in the same state of feeling, their minds only too much alike. But a return to the question was inevitable one way or other, and Mr. Beresford took it in hand, not without a little tremor, one still summer evening at the usual hour, when they were sitting in their usual places, their windows open, but the lamps lighted, and the soft dusk outside relieving with its shadowy background the soft illumination within.

'Do you remember,' he said, 'the talk we had one evening before all these agitations began? It was not decided. You would not say yes, or no.'

'Would I not say no? it was because it has too harsh a sound. Why should there be yes'es or no'es between you and me?'

'Ah, but it was needful. What do you say now? I can only repeat what I said then. You know all my heart. Speak to me, dear. Shall it be yes or no?'

She had nothing to do with blushing at her age—yet she blushed and was ashamed of it; but looked at him frankly, openly, all the same, holding out her hands. 'Dear,' she said, 'I will call you so too. No; why should we do this and disturb our life and trouble our children with new ideas. Listen, James Beresford. I would rather marry you than lose you; but there is no thought of losing you in any case.'

'None, my dear, none—none, whatever comes of it.'

'Then why should we trouble each other with new ideas and disturb our lives? We cannot be happier in our intercourse, you and I; we have all we want in each other. Let

the children marry; it is natural. What a blessing of God it is that we have these dear proxies, James! And my boy is not going away,' she said, the tears coming to her eyes. 'And I love your girl as if she were my own—and we are the father and mother without any trouble. What could heart wish for more?'

And no more was said. The subject was closed at once and for ever. Such is the perversity of human nature, that when James Beresford went home that evening he felt just a little cast down, disgusted, lonely, and slighted as it were by fate. He had not really wished for the change; indeed, did not really wish for it now; but yet—on the other side of the wall, Mrs. Meredith was much more comfortable—for why? She had been permitted the woman's privilege of being the refuser, which banished all possibilities of pique, and made it impossible for her to feel herself slighted. But by-and-by they were both a great deal happier, and at their ease, which they had not been for weeks before.

And do I need to tell how the natural conclusion which their father and mother wisely and happily evaded arrived for Edward and Cara? Not quite immediately, however, for the young man gathered his note-books together again, and having given up India, entered upon his course of dinners, and betook himself (like most other people) to the Bar. He was 'called' before the marriage took place; and when the marriage did take place the young people remained along with the old people in the two houses which were one. It would be hard to make an absolute appropriation of what belongs to No. 6 and what belongs to No. 8 in the Square. The thing which is most like a fixture is Mrs. Meredith, who sits smiling in the same chair as the years go on, hearing what everybody has to say. She is not expected to go to anyone; but everyone comes to her; and her chair is the only absolutely undisputed piece of property in the two houses. The young people are very happy and go honeymooning as once their elders did; and sometimes Mr. Beresford will make a journey in the interests of science or art. But nothing has touched the double house, nor is likely to touch it, till death does those sworn companions part.

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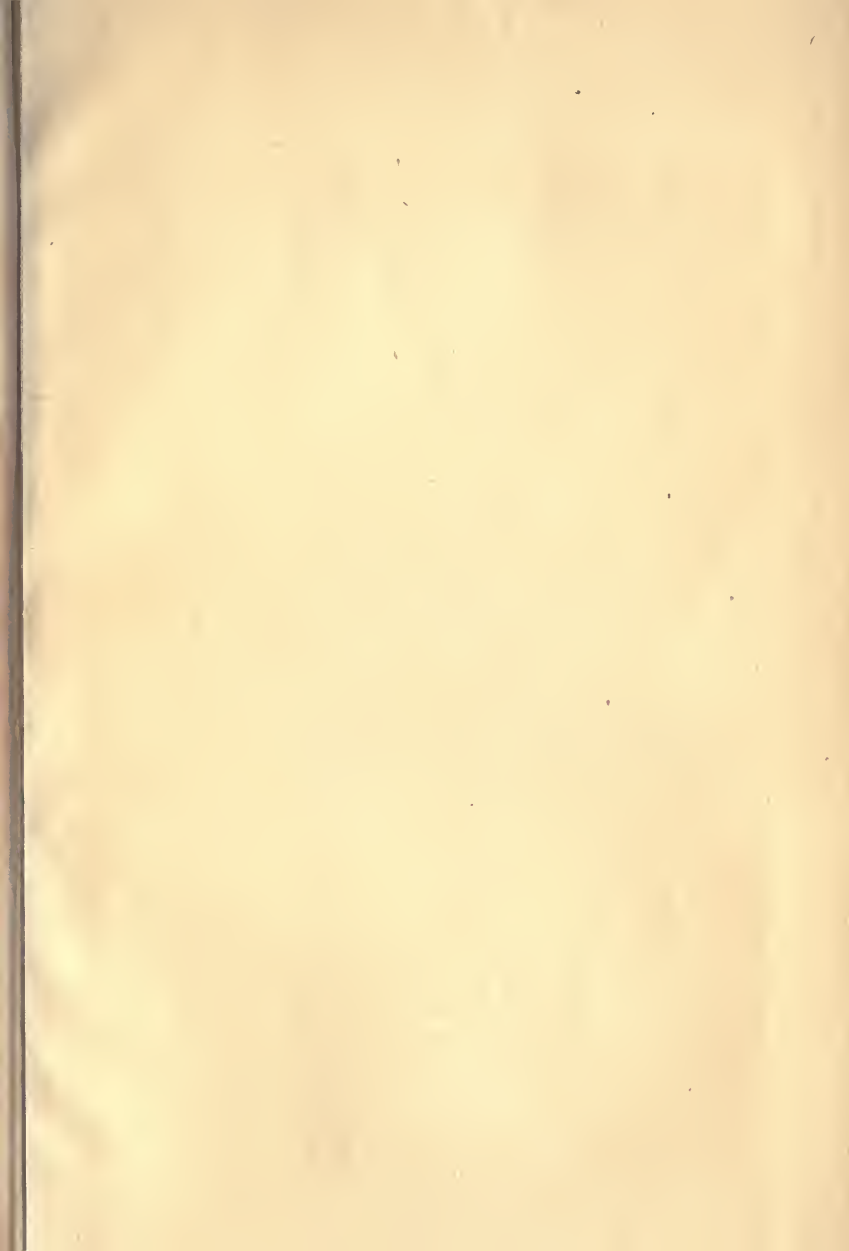
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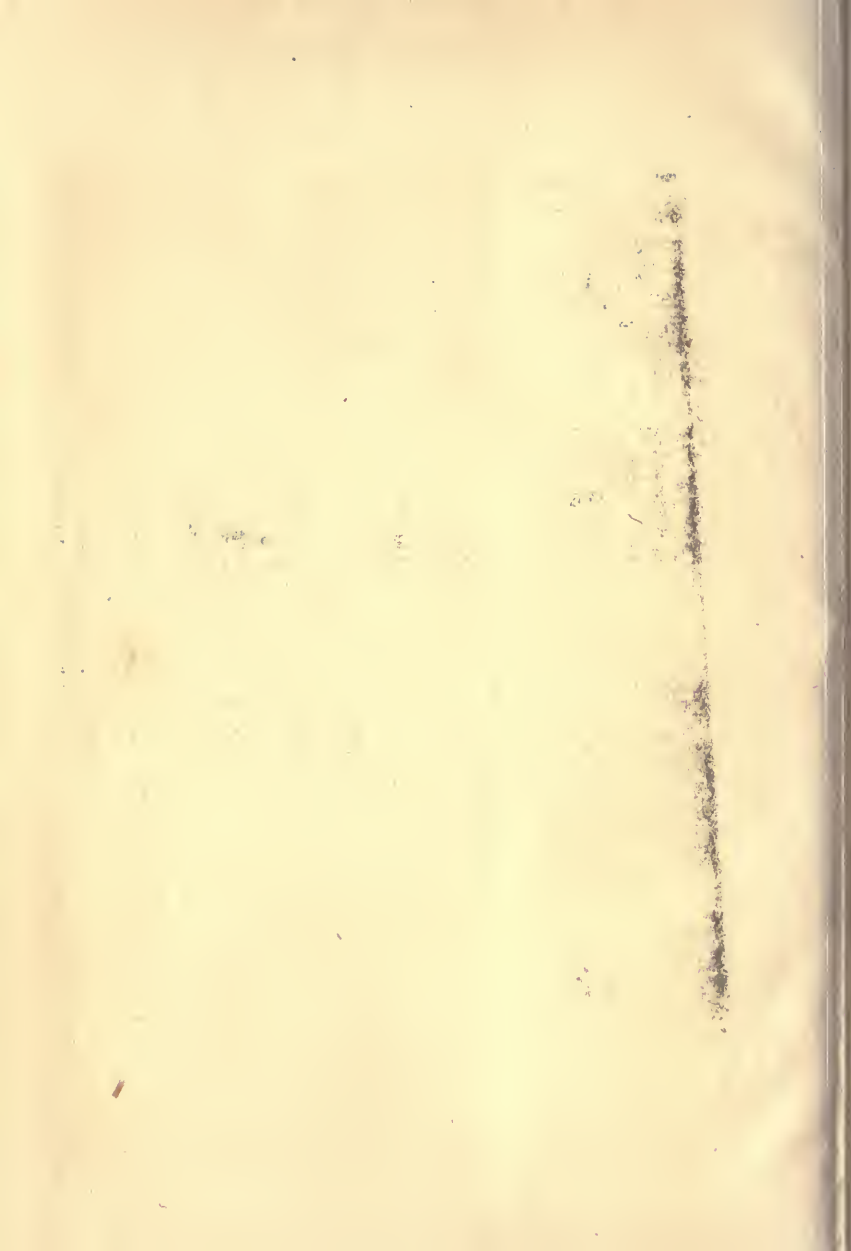
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